

**Citizen Perceptions of Online Interactivity and
Implications for Political Campaign Communication**

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Abstract

In this essay we test empirically whether U.S. citizens identify and distinguish between the media and human interaction components of the Internet as suggested by [Stromer-Galley](#) (2000). In addition, we explore how citizens understand the role of the Internet in political campaigns, and the role they themselves can play in the campaign process by

utilizing the interactive features of Internet applications. To answer these questions, we conducted focus groups in New Hampshire prior to the 2000 presidential primary election. The focus group discussions suggest that citizens perceive the "objective" types of interactivity identified by [Stromer-Galley](#) (2000): "media interaction" and "computer-mediated human interaction." Focus group participants viewed political campaign websites as offering expanded opportunities for citizen engagement with the campaigns in comparison to other media, as well as increased citizen control in relation to campaigns. Although the focus group participants noted that the Internet offers increased potential for computer-mediated human interaction between citizens and campaigns, and they reported a desire to see such opportunities employed, they expressed understanding the constraints placed on candidates in the context of political campaigning.

Key Words

Network-mediated communication, interactivity, campaigns, Internet, websites, political participation

Introduction

The Internet is routinely defined as an interactive medium. [Van Dijk](#) (1999) calls for an integrated approach to studying interactive media, starting with an assessment of the structural "more or less objective properties" of the medium (p. 17). These structural features he names "communication capacities," and these capacities "have particular potentialities and limitations which cannot be removed (inter)subjectively" (p. 17). Such characteristics are part of the infrastructure of the medium. They exist as empirically observable traits. Of equal importance are the ways in which *users* perceive the capacities of the medium, and the uses to which they are put. Van Dijk calls these the (inter)subjective characteristics of the medium. How people apprehend and engage with a medium constructs their perceptions of that medium, providing a second source by which scholars can think about the characteristics of a medium.

The literature on interactivity to date has barely addressed the issue of citizens' conceptions of online interactivity or responses to political campaigning online. [Stromer-Galley](#) (2000) offers two categories of objective characteristics of the Internet: media interaction and human interaction. She analyzes these categories in light of how political campaigns use the Internet, and finds that campaigns employ the media interactive characteristics of the Internet while avoiding the human interactive features. As a complement to and extension of that study, we seek to explore intersubjectively citizens' perceptions of the characteristics of the Internet as it was employed in the 2000 U.S. presidential primaries. In so doing, our aim is to provide better insight into a) laypeople's perceptions of the medium in order to b) better understand the medium and to c) better understand their uses of the medium, specifically their political uses. The primary research question guiding this study was: How do citizens perceive and characterize current forms of online interactivity in relation to political campaigns?

The structure of this article is as follows. After reviewing literature that indicates how interactivity has been conceptualized in scholarly analyses, we present and analyze data collected from focus group discussions with citizens conducted in New Hampshire prior to the 2000 primary elections. The findings we report offer a users' perspective to the emerging literature on the Internet as a political communication medium. We conclude by exploring some implications of these findings for political campaign communication.

Literature Review

Notions of interactivity can be traced back at least forty years, into fields such as cybernetics and automation studies. As [Huhtamo](#) (1998) argues, "the 'cult of interactivity' has been in the making for a long time" (p. 109). The development of interactive features on computers corresponds with the expansion of uses for computers, from purely mathematical calculations to simulation, visualization, word processing, gaming, and the "gradual spreading of the computer away from the administrative and industrial context into many different spheres of social life, including private use" (Huhtamo, 1998, p. 108).

[Huhtamo](#) (1998) demonstrates that "interactivity is part of the gradual development of the computer from ideas that were first discussed in connection with automation—a phenomenon that at first sight may seem to be its polar opposite" (p. 110). Huhtamo credits Marshall McLuhan with having presaged the interactive and communicative potential in processes of automation: "Automation affects not just production, but every phase of consumption and marketing; for the consumer becomes the producer in the automation circuit . . . Electric automation unites production, consumption, and learning in an inextricable process" ([McLuhan](#), 1994, p. 372-373, cited in Huhtamo, p. 108).

In contemporary communication studies, interactivity often has been viewed not as a phenomenon worthy of study in its own right, but rather as a synonym for communication, with some exceptions (c.f. [McLaughlin & Cody](#), 1982). In many studies of interpersonal, small group, organizational, and mass media communication, interactivity is a description rather than a trait or variable for study.[i] As [Rafaeli](#) (1988) indicates however, "interactivity is quintessentially a communication concept" and is worthy of communication scholars' attention (p. 113).

Interaction was defined and operationalized by [Rafaeli](#) in the context of interpersonal communication as "an expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions" (1988, p. 111). For him, interactivity is a variable in any human communication context. [Hacker](#) (1996), building on Rafaeli, applies interactivity to the Internet context, defining it as two or more message exchanges between people (mediated or not) in which the third and later messages are in response to the earlier messages.

Hacker, however, was not the first to offer a definition applicable to the online context. [Rogers](#) (1986) describes new communication systems, typically with a computer as one

of the components of the process, one that "talks back" to users" (p. 211). He explains that interactivity is a variable; a given communication technology can be more or less interactive (e.g. real-time chat versus website content). Moreover, the context and the human user are also important factors in the degree of interactivity. A situation in which two people exchange a series of email messages in which each subsequent message is a response to the prior message is interactive. Yet because of the possible technological delay in email, it is not as interactive as synchronous chat. [Van Dijk](#) (1999) also acknowledges and explicates the variable character of interactivity. He identifies four levels of interactivity that apply to "interactivity between human beings, between human beings and media or machines, between human beings by means of media, and even between media or between machines (technical interactivity)" (p. 11). The levels of interactivity range from the most elementary to the most complex. These levels are cumulative such that the highest level of interactivity can only be possible with two-way communication, a high degree of synchronicity, with control over the interaction, and in which there is an understanding of context and meaning.

In empirical research drawing on interviews with experts, [Downes and McMillan](#) (2000) concluded that people perceive that interactivity has six dimensions: direction of communication, time flexibility, sense of place, level of control, responsiveness, and perceived purpose of communication. They also identified that interactivity is a variable that increases as users of a two-way medium find they have greater control, responsiveness, and when the purpose of the interaction is to inform and not to persuade.

The underlying quality that makes something interactive is whether there is feedback ([Stromer-Galley](#), 2000). Feedback occurs when communication is responsive—when the receiver takes the role of sender and replies directly to the original message, whether the senders and receivers are human or machine. When the senders and receivers are human, [Van Dijk](#) (1999) and [Downes and McMillan](#) (2000) also point out that there is a shared level of control in the exchange. Interactive communicators must be able to switch roles and turn-take freely. In this process, participants share the burden of communication equally, and in so doing, hierarchical, linear structures of communication can be subverted ([Hacker](#), 1996).

[Stromer-Galley](#) (2000) argues that there are fundamentally two types of interactivity. One is computer- or network- mediated human interaction. Two or more people use the channels provided by, for example, the Internet as accessed by a computer or a television-top device, such as WebTV, to communicate with each other. The communication can occur in real-time or can occur in a time delay—as long as there is a response to the original message. People respond to each other in a communicative exchange facilitated through the Internet. Network-mediated human interaction has a high level of interactivity as suggested by [Van Dijk](#) (1999) and [Rogers](#) (1986).

The second kind of interactivity [Stromer-Galley](#) (2000) identifies concerns engagement with the medium itself. People can manipulate the medium to provide information or perform functions that are commanded by the users. Cybernetics theories in the 1940s defined interaction simply as feedback within a medium; interaction, in this context, is an

element of the channel itself ([Wiener](#), 1948). The channel of communication provides the feedback either between two machines or between some technological device and a person. For example, a hyperlink on a website changes the content presented based on the user's mouse-click. [Van Dijk](#) (1999) characterizes this kind of operation of selection and auto-response as having a low level of interactivity.

[Stromer-Galley](#) (2000) argues that it is useful to identify the two types of interactivity, particularly in thinking about the Internet as a network through which political activities, political information gathering and exchange, and political discussion can occur. As the Internet is heralded for its potential to reduce hierarchical barriers to communication and promote opportunities for citizens to communicate with political leaders ([Hacker](#), 1996), we need to understand whether the Internet has the characteristics that make such interaction possible. Stromer-Galley's analysis of how political campaigns use the characteristics of the Internet indicates that in the "objective" mode of observation suggested by [Van Dijk](#) (1999), the channel characteristics of the Internet make possible increased connections between citizens and political candidates, and amongst citizens. Intersubjectively, however, the needs and structural forces shaping campaign practices lead campaigns to eschew the human interaction components while adopting some elements of media interaction. We demonstrate below that the media-interactive capacity of the Web allows campaigns to create a simulacrum of interaction between campaigns and citizens (c.f. [Baudrillard](#), 1983), while avoiding the human-interactive components that campaigns find burdensome ([Stromer-Galley](#), 2000).

Arguably, the focal element in the larger picture of political campaigning online is the citizenry. The activity of political campaigning involves the candidate and the campaign staff, typically a medium or set of media through which the campaign tries to project its message and solicit citizen assistance and feedback, and citizens who either ignore, observe, or participate to some degree in the campaigning process. Questions raised by the appropriation of the Internet as a political campaign medium include: Do citizens perceive the Internet as providing interactivity with political candidates and their campaigns? If so, what forms of interactivity do they perceive, and how do they characterize and respond to these forms?

There is a dearth of literature on the issue of citizens' conceptions of online interactivity or responses to political campaigning online. On the basis of survey findings regarding citizen reactions to candidate sites, [Hansen](#) (2000) suggests that citizens would respond more favorably to candidate sites that provide what he calls a "reaction loop" for users of issue information. His findings, however, do not include inquiry into citizens' conceptions of interactivity in regard to candidate sites.

In view of the extant literature on interactivity and political campaigning, this essay serves two purposes. The first is to explore empirically whether citizens identify the media and human interaction components of the Internet as suggested by [Stromer-Galley](#) (2000). The second is to ascertain how citizens view the role of the Internet in political campaigns, and the role they themselves can play by utilizing the structural components of the Internet. Our findings help illuminate citizens' perceptions of the Internet as a

political tool, and whether they perceive that candidates' use of the Internet allows them to participate in the political process. In the following sections we detail the process by which we conducted this study and present our findings.

Method

Data for this study were collected through a series of thirteen focus groups with U.S. citizens in New Hampshire in January, 2000, two weeks prior to the presidential primary elections. To recruit participants for the focus groups, we tapped social networks of one of the researchers to locate thirteen people of various ages residing in towns across central and southern New Hampshire who were willing to host a focus group in their home. Employing a snowball sampling method, we asked each host to invite 4-6 additional people (for a total of 78 participants) to spend two hours viewing and discussing election-oriented websites and the role of the Internet in the political process. While viewing candidate websites, citizens were asked to talk about what they saw, what they liked and disliked, and what they thought was missing or what they expected to see on the candidate sites. As moderators, we did not direct citizens to talk specifically about interactivity on the websites. If citizens mentioned interactivity, we then probed further into their perceptions.

Using a laptop computer, access to an Internet Service Provider, and an image projection system, each group was shown at least two presidential candidate sites, one from each major party. Participants in the focus groups were directed to the homepage of a candidate site, and then asked to comment and reflect on what they saw. They were then encouraged to navigate the website collectively, discussing the site as they explored it. An assistant moderator took detailed notes on each group discussion, and the focus groups were videotaped. The audio tracks of the videotapes were fully transcribed, indexed, and coded thematically in correspondence with the Web pages under discussion. Aided by qualitative data analysis software, we made comparisons between every instance of focus group talk that pertained to the concepts we investigated, noting how prevalent the expressed perceptions were both within each focus group and across groups, **as well as the discursive aspects of the interaction. In presenting our findings from this study, we provide excerpts from the focus group discussions as substantiation and illustration of our claims.** To protect participants' anonymity, we use pseudonyms in all data excerpts. Comments by a moderator in the focus group transcripts are noted with the abbreviation "Mod."

By conducting focus groups in homes, we were able to co-participate in and observe the real-world experiences of citizens exploring election-oriented websites. Although we employed a standardized agenda of discussion-starting questions in each group, we sought to cultivate an informal atmosphere in order to facilitate dialogue between participants in the groups regarding the websites, rather than simply between the moderator and individual participants. Since the aims of our study concerned the themes that emerged in the interactions between participants and across groups, rather than individual utterances, we did not attempt to correspond specific comments with identifying characteristics of the individual who made them. In other words, the approach

we took in the focus group sessions was to foster intensive interaction, rather than attempt to conduct individual interviews in group settings.

We wanted the focus groups to be comprised of a wide spectrum of ages and, correspondingly, people with varying levels of experience with the technology and with politics. Because we were seeking to elicit a range of citizens' impressions of candidate websites and their perceptions of the sites' interactive potential, we were as interested to learn what people with little experience online think as those who are regular users. People unfamiliar with the technology may be more observant of the features of the medium than those who use it routinely, or they may bring a different set of observations than routine users. Similarly, those who do not look at political sites may bring perspectives to the discussion overlooked by regular political Web users but illuminating to researchers. The fact that some of our participants had little or no experience with the Internet, and many had never observed political websites, helped stimulate robust discussion within the focus groups, which is the goal of this method of data generation ([Kitzinger and Barbour](#), 1999).

Because we wanted the focus groups to reflect the full range of Internet experience levels characteristic of the U.S. population at the time of this study, our priority in recruiting participants was to have a well-distributed range of ages, since age tends to correspond with Internet use, with younger people being more likely to use the Internet than older people ([Pew Internet and American Life](#) 2001). The ages of the focus group participants ranged from 18 to 81 across the groups, with an average of 43 (SD=18), and the groups were comprised of slightly more women than men (57% female, 43% men).

Our participants were similar to the general U.S. population in overall Web use. Twenty-two percent of our participants never or rarely went online. Similar to findings by the [Pew Center for the People and the Press](#) (1998) a majority of our participants (58%) rarely or never went online to get news and information on current events, public issues, or politics. Similarly, 82% reported never going online to communicate with other people through forums such as newsgroups, discussion lists, or chat groups. In the discussions we had with our participants, very few reported having visited a political candidate website. Most suggested in the conversations that they did not realize that the candidates had websites.

Our participants were wealthier and better educated than the New Hampshire population. All participants were Caucasian (the general population of New Hampshire is 95% Caucasian). Fifty-three percent of our participants reported earning \$50,000 or more a year, while the media household income in New Hampshire is \$42,000. Seventy-two percent of the participants reported having a bachelor's degree or a professional degree, while only 14% of New Hampshire's population had a college degree.[ii] Eight percent of the participants reported having no more than a high school education. They were also more Republican than the general New Hampshire population. Over three-fourths reported being active in religious, labor, social, or political organizations in their communities. In **the** follow-up survey after their primary elections, the vast majority (86%) reported having voted in the primary—a rate higher than national or state

averages. It is possible that participation in these focus groups increased motivation to vote in the primary.

Findings

Throughout each focus group discussion, participants talked about interactivity in distinct ways that were congruent with the media interaction and human interaction types that [Stromer-Galley \(2000\)](#) identifies. Even without direct questions regarding interactivity, participants distinguished between the capacity to interact with a website by navigating its spaces as their interests dictated and the possibility of interacting with other people through a website. Second, the focus group discussions also revealed the potential these citizens perceive in the Internet as a political medium. In describing participants' views of interactivity, we found it difficult to separate their perceptions of interactivity from their discussions of what the Internet enables them to do politically, because participants discussed their views of interactivity in the context of their responses to political websites. Therefore, our analysis of participants' conceptualizations of interactivity are interwoven with analysis of participants' views of how the Internet factors in citizens' political participation. We found that the participants viewed the Internet as offering potential for political participation; at the same time, they were skeptical of whether candidates are willing or able to use the human interactive capacity of this new medium to the fullest extent. Some, expressed an awareness of the limited power they have as citizen-users to engage with campaigns online.

Media Interaction

The most salient aspect of media interaction for participants in our focus groups was control over their exposure to the depth, breadth, and configuration of content on a website. Participants in our focus groups commented on the responsiveness of the Internet to their commands and the sense of empowerment it gave them as they explored candidate sites. In most groups, participants described their ability to navigate a website driven by their own interests as a form of interactivity. One participant articulated this point directly:

Vince: It gives you control 'cause just watching a debate on television someone else is asking the questions, and not the questions I want to ask. So if I do the research on the Web, I have the control. I control the questions being answered. (Focus Group 11:187) [iii]

This participant's perception of control he has over the "questions being answered" on a candidate's website indicates the sense of control he has over the experience. However, it also suggests that this individual does not recognize the constraints placed on his "control" by the campaign, in that the website only provides "answers" to questions a candidate has strategically selected and offered on the site.

Another group of participants also explicitly defined interactivity as user control. In contrast to television, they viewed the Internet providing greater choice and control over

the information to which they expose themselves. When one of the focus group participants mentioned the interactive nature of the Internet, the moderator asked the participant to define interactivity, which led to this discussion:

Mod: Okay. Can you define interactive for me?

Joan: That I can, like what we're doing now.

Joan: I can go to a site and I can decide you know, what do I, what am I interested in, I don't have to sit and take whatever the TV's giving me. Cause this is the information.

Cindy: Mmm, mmm.

Joan: And if I go to a site, like I expected the Town Hall to be speeches. Town Hall

[laughter] and I actually was real excited to find something different and it wasn't what I

was looking for, but once I get there and I like it, I can decide to stay. If I don't like it, I

don't have to and-

Tim: You're in control.

Joan: Absolutely.

Tim: It's not true on TV.

Joan: Right and you're not wasting time.

Cindy: Right.

Joan: And you're not wasting time and you're getting the information you want. (Focus Group 6:128)

Participants across groups evaluated favorably the options candidate websites provide citizens for increased breadth and depth of information, the absence of news media filters, and websites' asynchronous and perpetual accessibility—in contrast with candidate ads, debates, and news on television.

The prominence of control as the defining characteristic of media interaction for our participants is illuminated by recent studies on the relationship between the shared sense of control that occurs between producers and users in the Internet medium and

perceptions of interactivity ([Downes & McMillan 2000](#), [Rogers 1995](#)). The focus group participants in our study talked substantially more about their ability to manipulate content on a website than about their fear of being manipulated by a site producer. Occasional comments revealed, however, at least some awareness that their information-seeking actions were constrained—and monitored—by website producers. When participants were unable to get information they wanted about a candidate during the exploration of candidate websites, comments were made regarding the campaign website producers, such as "They won't tell us that," or "They don't want us to know that."

One participant commented on the power of the website producer to monitor users' actions on the site and change content accordingly in terms of interactivity:

Frank: The interactivity you have with the Web is amazing in terms of being able to track where people go. With the Internet you can gauge where people are going and there are separate links to the First Lady and the family. If not many clicks to her come through they can track her as a First Lady.

Mod: Do you think they're tracking click-throughs on this site?

Frank: Oh big time. I would if I was a political candidate. I think it would be an interesting thing to track and then modify some things.

Mod: Does that make a difference to you that they are tracking click-throughs?

Frank: No. (Focus Group 7:132)

This participant's comments highlight the negotiation of control that takes place between campaign staff producers and citizen users of websites.

For these citizens media-interactivity was understood in relationship to the levels of control websites provide to users. Control in the focus group interactions referred primarily to citizens' abilities to navigate, to look in greater depth at political information they are interested in, or to change the configuration of the websites. Participants did not discuss at length the media-interactive components such as click-polls or audio and video as media-interaction. These elements were referred to not in terms of interactivity, but more often as ways that users could get more information or get more involved in the campaign. We take up some implications of this view later.

Network-Mediated Human Interaction

In most of the focus groups we conducted, participants recognized the capacity of the Web to enable interaction between users of the candidates' websites and the candidates themselves or some other representative of the campaign. Our participants identified two ways in which interaction between themselves and the candidate or a surrogate could

occur: (a) through electronic mail; and (b) through interactive forums such as bulletin boards or real-time discussions.

The focus group discussions revealed that participants are inclined to look favorably on the opportunity to email a candidate. Most also expect to receive a reply from the candidate or a surrogate, although they are aware of the risks candidates incur by allowing people to email them. Some suggested that bulletin boards or real-time "chat" could be useful to the candidates and to citizens, yet they were aware that logistical, ethical, and strategic problems could arise for the candidates if they employed such tools on their sites.

Email is one of the ways candidates can facilitate interaction with citizens. In providing an email address or a form for users to fill out and send to the campaign, the candidate invites feedback on the site and candidate's messages. An email address allows citizens to directly query and engage in an exchange with the candidate or surrogate. The presence of an email address therefore serves as an invitation for interaction to take place between visitors to the site and a representative of the candidate's campaign.

The focus group participants saw value in being able to email the candidate and the campaign. One participant stated: "It gives you a voice back to the candidates, a very important one" (Focus Group P9, 9:55). One participant recalled for her group the experience she had in emailing a candidate through a campaign website. She explained that she utilized the email option because of its ease: "They gave me an opportunity to respond to the candidate right there online, which I was more likely to do than pick up a pen or pencil and get the address and send some question or comment to him" (Focus Group 11:25). Other participants elaborated that, for them, email served as a direct connection to the campaign, to ask for clarification on an issue or to state a position that visitors had not seen covered in the press or could not find on the candidate's website:

Mod: Does anybody have any comments or thoughts about the Bush site? .

..

Judy: Well what Garry was saying, he didn't know what his stand was on the death penalty. An addition to the site would be the ability to send in a question and say, 'Let us hear what your stand is on this.'

Steve: Like a chat room.

Larry: Or an interactive site.

Judy: Where if you didn't find it in what he was publishing and it was an issue you can say, 'Let us hear what your stand is.' (Focus Group 2:51)

During the focus group discussions, participants articulated consensus that if they were to send an email message to the campaign, they would expect a response in return. In this vein, one participant related to the group her experience of contacting a presidential

campaign through email. She explained she was glad when an automatic response arrived explaining that she would receive a reply in the postal mail. She said it was nice to receive this notification, even though it was an automatic response "rather than have me wait, and be like 'why didn't they respond?'" (Focus Group 11:25).

Some participants indicated that in emailing a candidate, they were engaging him or her personally. The act of sending a message to the candidate through the website gave participants a sense that they were communicating directly with the candidate:

Monique: Well I like feeling like I can have more interactions with the candidates, personal interaction. Like somehow he is going to read this or someone close to him who can communicate the information to him, which makes me feel like if I'm going to have more interaction with him personally, it makes me more personally involved in the campaign. He's less distant because I'm able to interact with him, sort of . . . (Focus Group 11:202)

Another participant characterized a possible email exchange between the campaign and the citizen as a "conversation" and as being similar to face-to-face discussion. These participants conceptualized network-mediated communication as being bounded by the same rules and norms as other channels of interpersonal communication, such as face-to-face communication. The norms of interpersonal conversation are violated if a response is not received. The sender of the message feels slighted if after sending the message no response or feedback is given back to the sender:

Herman: I think that anybody who reads something like [an invitation to email] will have some questions. Inability to ask the question and receive an answer kind of turns a person off having to read it to superficially let it go.

Mod: Yeah right.

Herman: You can ask a question of a candidate or somebody representing the candidate, get an answer, it's a satisfactory answer, whether or not it's the answer you want. At least you get an answer. You've had a conversation. Face-to-face, as it were, even though they could be miles away.

Jake: I would agree with that. I think that would be beneficial. (Focus Group 1:33)

The participant who characterized a hypothetical email exchange as a conversation was also quick to characterize the inability to use email to pose a question and receive a reply as turning "a person off." To withhold a response can lead to the citizen viewing the candidate negatively. The implication for candidates and their online campaigns is that they risk giving participants a negative impression by not replying to email messages.

Although they expect a reply, the participants' conversations suggested that they were accepting of surrogates replying. Participants were aware of the campaign constraints placed on candidates and suggested a surrogate responding to the email was appropriate—as long as the surrogate accurately represented the candidate's positions. A conversation that occurred in one of our groups touched on these ideas:

Mod: Do you think you would ever type in a question?

Kendra: Yeah.

Mod: Ok. Do you expect a response?

Kendra: If I didn't get one, I wouldn't be impressed.

Mod: Ok, ok. Does it have to be from Al [Gore], or could it be like a staffer or a volunteer? At what point to you feel comfortable that you have gotten responded to?

Jim: That is the question, are you getting it from Al [Gore], or are you getting it from somebody who has volunteered.

Mod: Right, and does that matter?

Jim: They may have a list of things down there that Al [Gore] will say.

Mod: Right.

Kendra: If they followed up with an auto response, I would at least want that right away. 'thank you for your question, someone will get back to you,' it would be wonderful if it would be . . .

Frank: I would hope he would pick a few of them to answer (Focus Group 15:36)

For others, an email message sent to the campaign was perceived as an invitation for information overload. Therefore, some participants argued against the desirability of sending email to campaigns. Their rationale was that it is enough for citizens to read and listen to the candidate's rhetoric and determine for themselves the strength of the arguments and the credibility of the candidate. In other words, the view of these participants was that citizens can determine for themselves what is missing from a candidate's website and draw their own conclusions, and email from a campaign would not be useful in that process.

In many of the focus groups, participants spent time explaining what obstacles they believed candidates would encounter if configuring the campaign sites to allow for human interaction. Participants identified five obstacles: (a) the increased cost of

designing a site that allows interaction versus one that doesn't; (b) the need for a dedicated staff member to manage the email and/or interactive forum; (c) content accountability; (d) antagonistic use of the human interactive capabilities by non-supporters; and (e) the scale/volume of traffic such interactive opportunities might generate.

In one focus group, a participant suggested that the solution to candidates' email deluge could be a bulletin board. Others quickly pointed out that one problem a bulletin board might pose to the campaign is the inability to use ambiguity to their advantage:

Mod: Yeah, okay, so I give you this, maybe we'll like to see a bulletin board. Do you expect that the candidates would do that?

Kate: [Talk over] No because they're too wishy-washy. They're too nebulous.

Mod: Okay.

Cindy: That's true. They wouldn't want to be pinned down in writing.

Dave: Yep, yeah, yeah.

Cindy: But it seems to be they would have a large enough, staff to have somebody sit there and bang out answers to this stuff.

Mod: Right, sure.

Cindy: And it's not like, you know, posting it on the Web. They can have somebody do that everyday. It's not like it's a really difficult thing for them to actually do this. (Focus Group 6:40)

A couple of the participants, however, were unwilling to view email obstacles as too difficult for the candidate to overcome. Through staffing and allocating time to answering email themselves during down-time, such as travel, the candidates could ensure that messages had a response.

Several participants in our study spoke of the need for "maintaining boundaries" with political campaigns. They reported that in some ways the Internet facilitated these boundary-maintaining activities, in that the possibility of media interaction allowed them to seek information from campaigns without having to interact with other humans. Unsolicited email, however, crosses those personal boundaries in the view of some of our participants.

Discussions about candidate email sometimes led to participants speculating about other ways they could interact with the candidate. The most frequently mentioned alternative to email was a real-time, online discussion in which citizens rather than journalists could

ask questions and see others' questions. Although some saw this as advantageous, others were unsure the Internet could be the appropriate channel for such a forum between citizens and candidates.

The following discussion suggested that the participants struggled with trying to find better ways for candidates to campaign online. In particular, they searched for ways citizens might be able to see the candidate without the "spin" or the interception of the campaign strategist. These citizens wanted to see the candidates' reactions to tough questions and hear answers that had not been pre-scripted, researched, or carefully thought out before being disseminated in crafted speeches or advertisements. They articulated a desire to see the candidates think "on their feet." One participant in this discussion did not think the Internet could offer a forum in which citizens could ask questions of candidates and get responses that are genuinely from the candidate and not a script writer or strategist. The other participants in the group however, suggested a live discussion online could achieve this goal:

Celinda: They have to be in a live chat room.

Terry: They'd have to be a live chat.

Blake: I don't know, I'm talking about something that is ahead of time. It's not on the Internet.

Celinda: That's what I mean, a live chat! They're on there, and you fire out the question, and they fire it back.

Blake: How would you know that this was exactly how it happened. That it was not given to them in advance? So you think questions answered and he says to you, "Yeah o.k. I'll answer them and give them back to you and tomorrow." "Oh, o.k." I don't know if you see my point there? If they all got together and said--like Claire's saying--if I'm understanding you correctly, is that they all decided to get together and say "ok, we're going to do a couple of debates via Internet" and now--the Internet you can go in there—but [if] they didn't have a way to be prepared for that question, other than to answer it when you asked them . . . (Focus Group 13:101)

The dissenting participant was concerned that the absence of social cues in the textual environment would allow the candidates, unbeknownst to questioners, to pick only questions they wanted to answer or have the answers fed to them by campaign staff members. If citizens could see the participants in streaming video and audio, however, that would provide another layer of information by which to judge the candidates' responses to the question and ensure that candidates were not being fed answers or picking desirable questions.

Participants also were aware of the problems that might arise with a bulletin board or other discussion environment for the candidate. One group indicated that the campaign

would need additional staff just to maintain the site and oversee the discussion to ensure that messages were appropriate. They also thought such on-site fora would create risk for candidates if they allowed users who were opposed to the candidate to post messages attacking the candidate personally or the candidate's issue positions.

To summarize, the focus groups indicated that citizens are aware of the distinction between media and human interactive capabilities of the Internet. Although participants were unsure whether candidates could or should actually utilize channels that would facilitate network-mediated human interactivity, they identified clearly its potential for greater civic engagement in the electoral process. Their discussions reveal that they view network-mediated human interaction as potentially providing benefits to citizens by enabling them to share their opinions with the candidate and getting feedback on those opinions, raising questions and getting answers, and participating in debates such that the citizens become the questioners in unrehearsed and nontraditional interactions with candidates.

Implications for Political Communication

We found that our participants engaged readily in complex discussions about interactivity and online political campaigns. On the one hand they articulated awareness of and favorable response to media interactivity, in its ability to give them greater control over their political information seeking. Some participants also were aware and desirous of opportunities to communicate with candidates online. They viewed the Internet as giving them the opportunity to influence the platform of a campaign and/or participate in a campaign without physically leaving their homes or offices.

On the other hand, participants were wary about being duped or used by campaigns—one of the potential drawbacks of campaigns having expanded access to citizens through the human-interactive qualities of the Internet. They wanted candidates to engage them in genuine conversation, but many were unsure that candidates could or would. They were aware, to a surprising degree, of the difficulties candidates may encounter when opening themselves up to Internet-mediated interaction with citizens, and many were forgiving of candidates for not engaging in such interaction because of these difficulties. Although participants wished for candidates and campaigns to be run differently, they were unsure how the Internet could make a concrete difference. They wanted the Internet to allow them to participate more directly in the campaign, yet they did not want to be involuntarily pulled into it.

The larger political scene that is constructed, then, is one in which the candidate and the campaign can utilize the media-interactive components of the Web to create a simulacrum of interaction with citizens (c.f. [Baudrillard, 1983](#)) while avoiding the human-interactive components that campaigns find burdensome ([Stromer-Galley, 2000](#)). The media interactive elements that candidates employ on their sites, such as audio and video, search engines, even surveys, give an *appearance* that users are in control of the experience and getting the information from the candidate that they want while masking the actual, relatively limited scope of user control.

On a more optimistic note, the media-interactive components of the Web enable citizens to perceive themselves as participants in campaigns in broader and more immediate ways than do traditional media and facilitates the extension and expansion of campaigns through citizens. Our focus group data indicate that citizens who interact with a campaign via the Internet seem to experience a sense of virtual community with the campaign as a whole. Focus group participants noted a number of ways the Internet enables citizens to identify with and participate in a campaign. These included endorsing a candidate by creating a link from a personal homepage to the candidate's site, posting messages in support of a candidate on discussion bulletin boards elsewhere on the Internet, and participating in campaign agenda-setting by making their views on issues known to a campaign through email. As one participant commented on whether the Internet will catalyze political involvement:

Angela: I think it would because, in TV you are being fed information, and it stops there. Whereas [on the Internet], if you have something of interest and you go to that site, you can go deeper, you can find out more about the issue and you can, um, I mean it seems that you can probably go in any direction you want to find people that are involved in it or people's opinion on it or where you could go to participate. So really this would draw you more into the whole process and enable you to find a way to become involved. (Focus Group 14:93)

On a pragmatic level, then, we believe we can expect to see political campaigns continue to use the media interactive capabilities of the Internet to gather into the political campaign those people who are committed enough to the candidate to join their political campaign. Through the website, the campaign can invite those who have an interest in becoming a campaign actor to do so. Citizens will be able to sign up to receive lawn signs, to donate money to the candidate, or to receive a phone call from a campaign staff member to find out how they can get involved. Viewed from the campaigns' perspective, the Internet can significantly extend the reach and intensity of campaign communication activity as our focus groups suggest.

Our findings suggest that occasions when the candidate and the campaign open themselves up to exchange of ideas or policy opinions with citizens in a conversational exchange will remain infrequent. Given the current configuration of the political structure in the United States, we hold this to be a continuation of the status quo in the United States. Although the Internet and its interactive capabilities, in particular the human-interactive capabilities, make possible an increase in the level of contact between citizens and candidates, and a greater exchange between the masses and the elites of this society, such possibility is not being actualized. Not only do candidates avoid it because of the loss of control and ambiguity, ([Stromer-Galley 2000](#)), but citizens are also not demanding it.

Conclusion

In this article we presented empirical analysis and illustrative examples of citizens' perceptions of the interactive aspects of candidate websites. We have demonstrated that the focus group participants talked about interactivity in ways that support the "objective" types of interaction that [Stromer-Galley \(2000\)](#) posits. In light of political campaign communication, citizens view the Internet as enabling them to have greater control in their political information seeking, and making it possible for them to have increased contact easily with the campaign. However, citizens are aware of the obstacles campaigns face if they incorporate features on their campaign websites that enable full human-interaction.

Our decision to conduct the study in New Hampshire just prior to the presidential primaries had both advantages and drawbacks. Since we wanted to examine citizen perceptions of online campaign practices early in the 2000 electoral process, focus groups of on-task New Hampshire voters were highly strategic. We posited that the notoriously high level of attention campaigns and journalists paid to New Hampshire citizens engenders a higher level of political and media sophistication amongst citizens there than elsewhere in the U.S. This dynamic as well as the socio-economic profile of our respondents suggest that further research is needed to validate the findings of this study both outside the political crucible of New Hampshire and among a larger and more diverse group of Internet users.

At least two other observations uncovered in this research deserve further analysis. It is evident that citizens view the Internet as enabling a higher level of interaction with the political campaign itself. From the citizens' perspective, the Internet makes it easy to get involved. It would be beneficial to understand to what degree citizens see the Internet making possible expanded interaction with the campaign. This raises, however, an interesting question about the power relationship between citizens and candidates. In the end, we feel that the campaigns have the power to determine the level and the kinds of interaction citizens hold with them. There exists, then, an asymmetrical power in the online relationship between campaigns and citizens which favors campaigns. Although the Internet could be used to reduce this power differential by increasing the possibility of human interaction, the choice rests largely with campaigns. To date, most U.S. campaigns have not employed the human interactive capacity of the Internet. However, as our findings in this study suggest, citizens are not demanding it. It would be helpful to investigate this online power differential in greater depth, and with a focus on its implications for the political sphere.

As [Van Dijk \(1999\)](#) reminds us, it is important to understand the "objective" character of a given medium, to understand what its potential communication capacities are. That alone, however, will not ensure that a medium will be used or experienced by people in particular ways. Understanding a medium intersubjectively, that is, assessing how people view and use a medium, provides a richer perspective on the actual uses to which a medium will be put. The fact that citizens express a desire for human-interactive components at the same time as they express empathy for the obstacles that campaigns face in enabling human-interactive components suggests that there will be little pressure placed on candidates to provide these features. Although we continue to hold out hope

that the Internet's channel characteristics will be used to enable enhanced possibilities for interaction between citizens and campaigns as part of the larger political process of a democratic republic, the locus for actualizing this potential rests largely with campaigns. However, citizens' perceptions and expectations regarding network-media human interaction could shape campaign practices in this regard.

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Endnotes

[i] This assessment of the literature came from analysis of 380 articles that had as a key term "interaction." These articles were pulled from the Communication Abstracts database available at <http://www.cios.org>.

[ii] U.S. Census 2000, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/33000.html>

[iii] The focus group reference (11:187) is to group number (11) and section (187) out of which quote was pulled from the transcript. Transcripts were coded using the qualitative data analysis program, Atlas.ti. Coded section numbers are generated by the program.