

# Stimulating or Reinforcing Political Interest: Using Panel Data to Examine Reciprocal Effects between News Media and Political Interest

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**Stimulating or Reinforcing Political Interest:  
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## **Abstract**

Is the news media merely a tool for those already interested in politics or can the news media stimulate interest in politics? While the news media likely serve both functions, little research has examined these dual functions and how television, print, and online news media differ in their performance of these functions. The author uses simultaneous equation modeling of three-wave panel data from the American National Election Study (2008-09) to examine the roles of different media in both stimulating and reinforcing political interest. The findings demonstrate that television news is a tool for those with prior interest in politics, more than a mechanism to influence levels of political interest. In contrast, online and print news can stimulate political interest to a greater degree than these media serve those with prior political interest. These differing relationships to political interest are explained in terms of the effort and attention required to use these news sources, their information sharing capabilities, and their diversity of content.

**Keywords:** *television news; print news; Internet; political interest; simultaneous equation modeling*

As scholars, politicians, and community leaders contemplate declining levels of civic and political engagement and its threat to the health of democracies, media are simultaneously seen as a possible solution to and a cause of this problem. Television takes much of the blame for causing civic malaise with the Internet expected to exacerbate the problem (e.g., Putnam, 2000). The key question underlying this discourse is whether media use influences attitudes and behaviors or it is a tool to reinforce pre-existing attitudes and behaviors of a select group of citizens (see Norris, 2000). Specifically, can the Internet generate political interest and engagement or whether is it merely a convenient tool for those who are already interested and engaged in politics? These questions are central to understanding the role of media in democracy. This article explores the roles of the different news media (television, online, print) in both stimulating and reinforcing political interest. The theoretical focus is on political interest with the assumption that interest is a precursor and necessary condition of engagement - an assumption consistent with the literature in this area of research. The theory outlined in this article suggests that different news media have varied relationships to political interest, because of the differences in the effort and attention required to use these news sources, their information sharing capabilities, and their diversity of content.

## **Varied Media Forms and Varied Effects**

Research tends to treat the relationships among political interest, media use, and political engagement in one of two ways. One way is to treat media as having a causal role in shaping both political interest and behavior (see Figure 1). The media can shape people's sense of civic duty, attention to issues, interest in public affairs, and motivation to get involved in the political

process. For example, reading the newspaper may promote interest in environmental issues, help to identify a candidate who offers good solutions to these issues, and motivate citizens to vote for this particular candidate. This modeling approach is evident in several political communication research pieces (Guo & Moy, 1998; Lupia & Philpot, 2005; McLeod et al., 1996; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). In this model, the news media have roles to play in shaping a citizen's attitudes and behavior. Norris (2001) refers to this process as mobilization. In essence, the media has a role to play in stimulating political interest and engagement.

Another way to think about the relationships among these variables is to view individuals as having more autonomy in choosing the sources of information to fit pre-existing interests. Politically interested individuals may decide to follow public affairs by reading the newspaper, watching television, or searching for political information online (Figure 2). This media use feeds pre-existing interest in public affairs and reinforces this political interest and political engagement. This modeling approach is evident in many recent works (David, 2009; Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Xenos & Moy, 2007). This approach is consistent with the uses and gratification approach to media use (Norris, 2000). From this perspective, the media becomes an information tool for those already interested and engaged in politics. Norris (2001) refers to this process as reinforcement.

While both models have coexisted in political communication research, these models merit a re-examination in light of new media, e.g., the Internet. Online news can have different implications on individuals and their levels of political interest and engagement. The reasons for these differences relate to the degree of effort and attention required to use this news source, the Internet's information sharing capabilities, and its diversity of content. These characteristics of

online news sources can alter how individuals use this medium and the implications of this use. The relationship between media use and political interest may be reciprocal in nature, but the characteristics of these different media can make the effects run stronger in one direction than the other direction (Figure 1 versus Figure 2). Specifically, I argue that online news may have a stronger effect on stimulating political interest (Figure 1), than reinforcing political interest (Figure 2).

### ***Degree of Effort Required to Access Media***

The Internet provides relatively quick and easy access to a vast amount of information. In 2007, 61.7% of households had an Internet connection at home (NTIA, 2008). While comparable statistics about households' newspaper subscriptions are difficult to find, an overestimate estimate would consider the total number of paid circulation divided by the total number of households. This estimate is overstated because not all of this circulation ends up in American homes, not all circulation is based on subscriptions, and many households have subscriptions to more than one daily newspaper. Based on 2007 data, 45.1% of American households consume a daily newspaper (Kreider & Elliott, 2009; <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2009/tables/09s1093.pdf>). An internet connection is much more common than a newspaper subscription in American households. The prerequisite level of motivation or interest to read a newspaper might be greater in order to justify the effort required to access this source. In contrast, the Internet may diminish the barriers to accessing information, reducing the level of motivation or interest required to gather information. In other words, the effect running from prior political interest to media use (Figure 2) may be weaker for

online news, than print media. Online news could reach those people who are only marginally interested or not at all interested in politics.

In this way, the Internet may function more like television is expected to function. Television is expected to reach a broader audience, because it reduces the level of effort and literacy skills required to access news (Chaffee & Frank, 1996; Guo & Moy, 1998; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). This level of effort is comparable to getting a television and a cable connection. Instead, the mechanism for Internet access involves a variety of devices (cell phones, computers, etc.) and an Internet connection. While many citizens justify their effort for entertainment or other purposes, this effort also enables access to news sources. This low effort required to access news sources may diminish the effect of prior political interest on online news uses (Figure 2).

### ***Degree of Attention Required to Use Media***

That said, the Internet is largely a self-directed medium making it important to examine users' motivation for use (Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Unlike television where the users can turn on the television and passively absorb the content or turn on the television as background noise (see recent discussion in Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009), Internet use tends to require more user attention. This news media resembles print sources, which require continued attention as one reads and turns the pages of a newspaper or magazine. This continued attention may enable political learning (McLeod & McDonald, 1985). With this greater attention, people are more likely to process the content, which could magnify the content's influence on political interest (Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). Because of the greater likelihood of processing information, online and print news may have a greater capacity than television news to change people's levels of political interest (Figure 1).

Research, on the other hand, has yet to clearly establish the relationship between online news use and learning (see discussion in Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2008). Some studies suggest that online news influences political knowledge (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Norris, 2000), especially when online news use is combined with political discussion (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004). Other studies demonstrate that online news consumption influences political participation indirectly through online and offline discussion (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). The degree of attention required to use online news sources demonstrates a process of reciprocal causation, i.e., some interest is required to use this source (Figure 2) and this source stimulates more interest (Figure 1).

### ***Information Sharing***

Not only does the Internet enable quick access to information, the Internet facilitates information sharing in a capacity unlike print sources and television. This information sharing is important, as many researchers attribute the motive for media use in terms of social utility, e.g., people use media to fuel conversation with peers (David, 2009; Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009; Rubin, 2002). The Internet facilitates communication among friends, family, and colleagues, as well as other Internet users. The communicative functions of the Internet allow for easier information exchange so that one does not need to *directly* visit news websites. Exposure to news stories could occur through communication with informed friends, family, and colleagues. While citizens often discuss what they read in the newspaper or watch on television news, the Internet offers a sharing of original information unlike these other media and enables a subsequent discussion of this information (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Shah et al., 2005). The original news stories can be re-distributed to social networks and accessed at a time

convenient for the recipient. Weblogs are key mechanisms for this information exchange. Social networks can facilitate access to civic and political information reaching those citizens who are less motivated or interested in public affairs. In this way, the Internet provides an opportunity for “incidental learning” (Guo & Moy, 1998). As such, the relationship of pre-existing interest to online news consumption may be weaker than the effect of pre-existing interest to conventional media use, such as television and print (Figure 2).

### ***Volume of Information***

Unlike print and television news sources, the Internet enables access to a voluminous amount of information. While television and print sources are diverse, the content is limited to stories that editors and producers define as interesting (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2008). While print and television news sources increasingly offer their selections online, online news sources offer greater choice in content and do not merely reflect the prominence of stories found in the print edition (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). Furthermore, the Internet offers a wide variety of news sources outside of the conventional news media. The greater diversity in content means that the Internet user may be better able to track public affairs, particularly around issues that most interest them (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2008). Online news sources can help citizens bypass conventional media’s coverage bias or biased coverage and help generate and sustain interest in issues that are more personally relevant to the individual. In sum, the relationship between online news and political interest may be reciprocal, but there are reasons to suspect that online news may be able to stimulate political interest by reducing the effort required to access information of personal interest to users through direct and indirect access to news sources (Figure 1).

## Existing Research on Internet Use, Political Interest, and Engagement

Empirical work in this area tends to focus on testing simple causal processes, e.g., models with a single dependent variable. Often media use and political interest are entered as exogenous variables in a model predicting engagement without much clarification on how these two exogenous variables relate to each other and their combined effect on political engagement (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Kwak, Skoric, Williams, & Poor, 2004; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino & Donovan, 2002). These simple causal models often produce results that amount to questioning whether news media use has any significant impact on political engagement. For example, when controlling for political interest in a model connecting conventional media use and engagement, the relationship between media use and engagement sometimes disappears (Pattie & Johnston, 2003) or becomes more modest in size (e.g., Scheufele & Shah, 2000). The same pattern occurs when online news sources are added to the model (e.g., Bimber, 2001, 2003; Shah & Scheufele, 2006; Mossberger et al., 2008; Xenos & Moy, 2007). The pattern of reduced correlations between engagement and Internet use also occurs when Internet use *in general* is considered in a model controlling for political interest (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Krueger, 2006).

Boulianne (2009) presents a meta-analysis of the relationship between Internet use and engagement. This area of research is full of contradictory findings. This meta-analysis suggests that when political interest and Internet use are combined in a single equation model predicting engagement, the effect of Internet use is less likely to be statistically significant than when political interest is not included in the single equation model (Boulianne, 2009). The meta-data

could not be used to determine whether political interest is a confounding variable in the relationship between online news and engagement or whether political interest mediates the relationship between online news and engagement (Figure 1 versus Figure 2). This relationship is a central focus of this article.

Several studies have explored political interest, media use, and political engagement using models with multiple dependent variables (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, et al. 2007) and a handful have used panel data (Eveland, et al. 2005; Shah and Scheufele, 2006). In all these studies, political interest is treated as an antecedent to all forms of media use (Eveland, et al. 2005; McLeod, et al. 1999; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, et al. 2007; Shah and Scheufele, 2006). These studies seem to take for granted the causal ordering of political interest and media use. Some of these studies control for political interest, but do not show this variable (or report the coefficients) in their structural equation models (Eveland, et al. 2005; Shah, et al. 2007). In some studies, different types of media use are combined into a single variable, which does not allow an exploration of how political interest may relate differently to television and print news (Eveland, et al. 2005).

Their approach is consistent with the uses and gratification approach to media effects. This approach assumes that people have specific goals or needs related to media use. When media uses become so pervasive to the point that use is routine because of easy access, people may not have clear goals related to use. Rather they may logon for one reason, e.g., check email, then “incidentally learn” (Guo & Moy, 1998) other material, e.g., political information or information about current events. Furthermore, citizens may receive this information through their social networks, making personal motives or goals less significant for predicting patterns of media use. While the relationship between media use and political interest may be reciprocal,

this prior research exploring multiple dependent variables assumes a causal flow from political interest to media use. In contrast, I argue that the ease of access, information sharing through networks, and the volume of information makes online news distinct from other media uses in relation to political interest. The causal flow may be stronger from online news to political interest (Figure 1), compared to political interest to online news (Figure 2).

In all works cited in this article, political interest is treated as an antecedent to political engagement. What is political interest? Political interest is an evaluative statement or judgment about how appealing the realm of politics is for the respondent. The assumption is that this evaluative statement or judgment is to some degree influenced by how politics is covered in the media. A variety of factors may influence political engagement, e.g., being asked to participate in a political group (e.g., Verba et al. 1995) and having free time available for such endeavors (e.g., Putnam, 2000). The role of the media is one of many factors that influence patterns of engagement. Political interest is likely more malleable in relation to the media than political behavior. The research's consistent treatment of political interest as an antecedent to political engagement seems logical. This judgment would occur before the behavior associated with politics, e.g., voting, political talk, or attending a campaign rally.

Other models with multiple dependent variables help contextualize the causal relations explored in this article, as they explore the relationship among these three variables and other forms of engagement (volunteering, community work), online discussion, political knowledge, and political efficacy (McLeod, et al. 1999; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, et al. 2007). My analysis casts light on a submodel within these multifaceted models and explores more complex interrelationships, e.g., reciprocal processes, among the three variables of political interest, media use, and political engagement. In contrast, these multifaceted models assume

unidirectional effects among these three variables (Eveland, et al. 2005; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, et al. 2007, Shah & Scheufele, 2006). The model examined in this article explores how the relationship of political interest and media use depends on the type of media use, e.g., television news, online news, and print news. The causal direction matters as it assesses the degree to which the Internet can generate political interest and engagement among those who are not currently interested and engaged (expanding the base of active citizens) versus the degree to which it is merely a convenient tool for those who are already interested and engaged in politics.

I suspect that online news has a stronger role in stimulating political interest (Figure 1), compared to reinforcing political interest (Figure 2), considering the degree of effort and attention required to use online news, the information-sharing capabilities, and diversity of information. In this model, political interest mediates the relationship between online news and engagement (Figure 1), rather than serves as a confounding variable (Figure 2). This article examines three central questions and hypotheses about media use, political interest, and engagement:

*Research Question 1:* How do the different news media relate to political interest?

*Hypothesis 1:* The relationship between online news and political interest is positive.

*Research Question 2:* Are the causal effects stronger in one direction compared to the other (Figure 1 versus Figure 2)?

*Hypothesis 2:* Online news has a stronger effect on political interest, compared to the effect of political interest on online news.

*Research Question 3: How does political interest relate to media use and engagement?*

*Hypothesis 3: Political interest mediates the relationship between online news and engagement, rather than serves as a confounding variable.*

## **Methods**

This article uses panel data from the American National Election Survey (2008-09) to examine these questions. The findings are based on the combined sample for two cohorts of recruitment (see [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org) for details). Respondents were recruited by telephone and then completed monthly surveys using the Internet. This analysis is based on the advance release, preliminary data collected during September (Time 1), October (Time 2), and November 2008 (Time 3). ANES staff continue to work on finalizing the weights and implementing quality checks for the data set. The author completed several quality checks on the data, such as ensuring that the sex and race of the respondent did not change in the various waves used in this analysis as well as ensuring that any changes to educational status were plausible (incremental changes). A handful of cases were identified to have serious internal consistency issues, such as changing sex, race, and dramatic changes in educational status (high school to doctoral degree). These cases were removed from analysis. Appendix A includes descriptive statistics and the details of the variable construction. The data presented is based on un-weighted data. The ANES recommends weighting the data to account for an over-sample of Latinos (n=101 in these waves) and African Americans (n=180 in these waves). Because the weighting scheme is still being finalized (and unlikely to have an effect on the coefficients reported in this article), un-weighted

data are presented. The minimum preliminary response rate (AAPOR Response Rate 3) for the September, October, and November panel data is between 26% and 27%

([http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/2008\\_2009panel/anes2008\\_2009panel.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/2008_2009panel/anes2008_2009panel.htm)).

The data set is of tremendous value as a longitudinal study, which allows for an analysis of how the variables change over time, rather than a snapshot of the variables at a single point in time. This three-wave panel data allows for an analysis of temporal ordering, because the status of variables at Time 1 can be accounted for, when assessing changes at Time 2 and Time 3. This three-wave panel design offers greater clarity on the causal processes compared to the two-wave panel design used in previous ANES studies. Longitudinal data are rare in this field of research (Boulianne, 2009). Experimental designs are rarer and would further help untangle causal ordering and the attribution of changes in the dependent variable to the independent variables. Experiments would also help rule out unobserved heterogeneity. To help assess causal attribution, this panel data requires multiple statistical controls to rule out spuriousness.<sup>1</sup>

The endogenous variables are media use, political interest and political talk. Political interest has been measured in a variety of ways, including campaign interest (e.g., ANES time series data) and following public affairs (e.g., PEW Post-Election Surveys; David, 2009). The measure used in this article assesses the overall appeal of government and political affairs. The measure is a more long term outlook about politics and its appeal. As such, it fits well with the media use variables about general or ritual patterns of use in a “typical week”. These broad measures are appropriate for the mechanism examined in this article. Rather than examining how a specific campaign or other events influence media use and political interest, I am interested in a cultivating effect or socializing effect around media use and political interest. ANES’s time series data tends to focus on interest in a specific election campaign and media use related to the

campaign. PEW data refers to media use in the past day and following public affairs more generally. These media use variables are too specific for the research questions explored in this article; these other measures are highly specific to time and context.

The average level of political interest in the entire sample is approximately 2.6 on a scale of 0 (not at all interested) to 4 (extremely interested), which signifies that respondents, on average, are between “moderately” and “very interested” in politics. The average level of political interest changed only slightly from Time 1 to Time 3 (2.70 to 2.78). In terms of talking politics as well as print and online news use, respondents reported engaging in these behaviors, on average, approximately three days of a typical week. Television news watching was more frequent than use of other news media. Respondents reported watching television approximately five days during a typical week.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to controlling for media uses at Time 1, several other Time 1 variables were controlled for to rule out spuriousness. Political efficacy, certainty of voting decision, and intention to vote in the election were controlled for as these variable likely impact political interest at Time 3 and possibly media uses at Time 2. Finally, several demographic variables are controlled for in completing this analysis. The choice of these variables reflects existing research in the field (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), but also attempts to replicate the demographic controls used by other researchers analyzing ANES data (e.g., Bimber, 2001, 2003; Mossberger, et al. 2008; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Norris 2000; Xenos & Moy, 2007) . These variables are age, gender, race, education, and income. Approximately 57% of respondents used in this analysis are female and approximately 12% of the respondents are racial minorities (African Americans or other racial groups, not Hispanic). The average age of the respondents is 52 years.

Respondents tend to have some college education (mode, mean) and earned, on average, \$50,000 to \$75,000 per year.

A partial correlation matrix was created in SPSS and imported into Lisrel 8.80 for analysis. This strategy is borrowed from Shah et al. (2005) and Shah et al. (2007). This strategy helps focus Lisrel's model fit estimates on the variables of interest. The partial correlation matrix controlled for media uses at Time 1 (television, print, online), political efficacy, intention to vote, certainty of voting decision, and demographic variables.

Lisrel 8.80 is used to estimate multiple simultaneous equations among political interest, media use, and political talk. The value of this modeling approach is that it simultaneously estimates the direction of causal effects among political interest, engagement and media use in contrast to the standard two-stage least squares approach. This simultaneous estimate is superior to the two-stage least squares approach, because it allows for a modeling of three-wave data and is better at estimating standard errors which is critical to the computation of statistical significance of the different estimates in reciprocal effects model. When used to analyze panel data, simultaneous equation modeling allows for an analysis of complex causal processes, such as those processes presented in this article. Maximum likelihood estimation is used for estimating the coefficients in the model. Lisrel estimates the "freed" (or not fixed at zero) coefficients that maximize the likelihood that the sample covariances could be observed, if the model constituted the causal process in the general population.

## Results

Figure 3 presents the results of the simultaneous equation model of the relationships among political interest and talk at Time 1 (September 2008), media uses at Time 2 (October 2008), and political interest and talk at Time 3 (November 2008). The model controls for prior levels of media uses (television, online, print), gender, age, education, income, racial minority status, efficacy, intention to vote, and certainty of voting decision. These variables are not presented in this diagram, because they are accounted for in producing the partial correlation matrix in SPSS (prior to importing the correlation matrix into Lisrel).

The model fit (Chi-square=52 with 3 degrees of freedom) could be improved by allowing for a correlation among media uses at Time 2. This modification was not made as this modification would require assumptions about causal directions (which media uses at Time 2 cause other media uses at Time 2) and unnecessarily complicates the interpretation of indirect effects. When these modifications are made (regardless of the direction of causality assumed), the model fits better ( $p \geq .05$ ), meaning there are no statistically significant differences between the observed covariance matrix in the sample and the model-estimated covariance matrix. The coefficients in Figure 3 do not change substantially (standardized coefficients are within .01) when these changes are made. Indirect effects, an important part of the analysis, are more straightforward to interpret when these modifications are not made. Specifically, the indirect effects of media use on engagement can be attributed to the pathways leading through political interest.

The findings suggest that the different media have varying relationships to political interest (Figure 3). Watching television news has the largest positive correlation with political

interest (and talk) as measured at Time 1 and Time 3, compared to other media uses, even after controlling for possible confounding variables. Those respondents who are interested and talk about politics (Time 1) are more likely to watch television news (Time 2). Those respondents who watch television news (Time 2) are also likely to engage in additional political talk (Time 3). In other words, there is a positive feedback loop (reciprocal process) between television watching and talking politics. Watching television news does not have a significant direct effect on political interest at Time 3.

Political interest (Time 1) is not a significant predictor of other media sources, e.g., print news or online news (Time 2). Both online and print news (Time 2) affect political interest (Time 3). The more frequently a citizen reads print and online news, the more interested in politics they become. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. Online news has a positive relationship with political interest. This effect is stronger running from online news to political interest, rather than vice versa.

The relationships among print and online news media, political interest, and political talk are quite complex. While these news uses do not have significant, *direct* effects on the frequency of talking politics, accessing these news sources stimulates political interest which in turn results in higher levels of political talk (Table 1). In other words, online and print news have significant, indirect effects on political talk. The effects of these news media on engagement are largely mediated through political interest. Using online news stimulates interest, which generates political talk ( $p \leq .001$ ). Reading the newspaper stimulates interest, which generates political talk ( $p \leq .05$ ). In sum, the effects of these news media on political talk are mediated by political interest. This finding offers support for Hypothesis 3.

## Discussion

The findings about television news, political interest and political talk are a sharp contrast to scholarship that treats television news as an inferior medium for civic and political purposes (Hollander, 2007; Miron & Bryant, 2007; Putnam, 2000; Schoenbach & Lauf, 2002). Television news seems to be the medium of choice for those interested and engaged in politics.

Furthermore, watching television news prompts additional talk about politics. Hollander's (2007: 385) meta-analysis of the literature on media and political interest suggests that "television news attention can outperform either exposure or attention to newspapers in predicting political interest." This hypothesis finds some support in recent works using cross-sectional data (e.g., David, 2007; Mossberger, et al. 2008; Xenos & Moy, 2007) as well as some classic works in the field (McLeod, et al. 1999).<sup>3</sup> However, the analysis of panel data suggests the assumptions about causal ordering may be off. Television news is the medium of choice for those citizens who are *already* interested in politics, more than a method for stimulating political interest. The reason for this role could be that people have a distracted viewing of television news and as such, there is little impact on their attitudes or judgments. On the other hand, television news does stimulate political talk by giving people an idea about current political topics. *They may not pay enough attention to the details of these topics to have any effect on their attitudes or judgments, but they can raise these topics as part of a political discussion.* This fits with the idea of media use for social utility (David, 2009; Romer, Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009; Rubin, 2002).

The findings speak to Norris's (2000) conception of a virtuous circle. Media use is believed to "further activate those who are already most active" (318). This depiction of media effects is appropriate for television news, but the findings suggest that this description is

inappropriate for describing online news uses. Norris (2000) disputes the idea that media use can affect the level of political interest of the truly disinterested. She argues that when the disinterested are inadvertently exposed to this information, they are “habitually more likely to turn over, turn off, or surf to another Web page. If they do catch the news, they are likely to pay little attention” (19). The findings suggest [otherwise](#). While theoretically I believe that the relationship between media use and political interest is reciprocal, the empirical evidence presented in this article suggest that the causal forces run stronger in one direction compared to the other. The use of online news sources transforms people into interested and (albeit from indirect mechanisms) engaged citizens, to a greater degree than online news serves as a tool for those already interested in politics. Online news stimulates political interest, which in turn has a significant, positive effect on level of political talk.

Like television, online news may require minimal effort to access news sources, but online news has a more substantial effect on changing people’s level of political interest. Like print newspapers, online news use requires some continued attention which may enhance the effects of this news use on political interest. Like turning the printed pages of a newspaper or magazine, online news requires clicking, scrolling, and searching. Furthermore, the volume of information means there is content to peak almost anyone’s interest. Through the Internet’s information-sharing functions, people can access this information with little effort. All of these features of online news combine to enable online news to stimulate political interest.

Online news has civic pay-offs in stimulating interest in public affairs and indirectly increasing levels of political talk. The findings offer some strong support for the role of online news in creating informed and engaged citizens. This finding is a critical contribution to the often contradictory findings in this area of research. [These new findings highlight the dynamics](#)

of the process linking news media, political interest, and political engagement in a way that is unlike other studies.

While other studies have explored political interest, media use, and political engagement using more multifaceted models (Eveland, et al. 2005; McLeod, et al. 1999; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah and Scheufele, 2006; Shah, et al. 2007), the assumptions within these models have been that political interest leads to media use. The findings presented in this article suggest that online and print news sources seem to have a stronger effect on political interest, than vice versa. In other words, the stronger causal forces are opposite from those assumed by these other scholars. Given these new findings, further research should consider how this alternative causal ordering may impact other dimensions of political engagement, such as political knowledge, political behavior and other forms of political expression beyond political talk. For example, if online news can promote political interest among those who were previously uninterested, then maybe online news sources can also help ameliorate knowledge and participation gaps. Other studies have found that online news use along with online or offline political discussion can significantly influence political knowledge and engagement (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Shah et al. 2005). However, given the demographic differences in who accesses online news and engages in politics, the tentative conclusion has been that only those who are already interested and engaged will benefit from these new opportunities (e.g., Bimber, 2001; Boulianne, 2007; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Norris, 2001; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). This article suggests that it is not only those who are interested and engaged who will benefit from online news. Online news sources may stimulate interest. This stimulation of interest could set in motion a reciprocal process between information processing and knowledge that addresses the knowledge gap in the population (Eveland, Shah and Kwak, 2003).

The remaining question is whether the media effects on engagement are substantive. For television news and political talk, there is a substantive positive feedback loop. This loop could be conceived as a circular, accumulating effect. This effect becomes substantive as it circulates through. For online and print news sources, the effects on political engagement are much smaller. Further research should continue to explore the differential effects of online news on engagement for different segments of the population, such as youth (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). If the effects on engagement are larger for those groups with historically lower levels of participation, as suggested by Shah et al. (2001), then online news could have a significant impact on participatory inequality. In addition, experimental research would help with a more nuanced causal analysis and attribution. What type of news content, under what conditions, influences political interest and engagement? These areas of additional research can help assess whether the effects of online news on engagement are substantial.

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## Appendix A: Details of Variable Construction

Variable	Values and Variable Construction Mean (Standard Deviation)
Political Interest	<i>Question:</i> How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics? <i>Responses are recoded:</i> 0 = not at all interested to 4 = extremely interested Wave 9: 2.70 (.97); Wave 11: 2.79 (.98)
Political Talk	<i>Question:</i> During a typical week, how many days do you talk about politics with family or friends? Wave 9: 3.45 (2.13); Wave 11: 3.48 (2.19)
Online News	<i>Question:</i> During a typical week, how many days do you watch or read news on the Internet, not including sports? Wave 9: 3.36 (2.69); Wave 10: 3.34 (2.67)
News-papers	<i>Question:</i> During a typical week, how many days do you read news in a printed newspaper, not including sports? Wave 9: 3.49 (2.84); Wave 10: 3.44 (2.81)
TV News	<i>Question:</i> During a typical week, how many days do you watch news on TV, not including sports? Wave 9: 4.91 (2.24); Wave 10: 4.89 (2.23)
Efficacy	<i>Question:</i> How much can people like you affect what the government does? <i>Responses are recoded:</i> 0 = not at all to 5 = a great deal Wave 9: 1.67 (1.02)
Intend to vote	<i>Question:</i> Needless to say, the next election for President of the United States is a long time away in November. What is your best guess- will you vote or will you not vote in the election for President? <i>Responses are recoded:</i> 0 = will not vote; 1 = will vote Wave 9: .94 (.24)
Certain of vote	<i>Question:</i> How sure are you of that [who you think you will vote for in the election for President]? <i>Responses are recoded:</i> 0 = not sure at all to 4 = extremely sure Wave 9: 3.17 (1.12)
Females	<i>Responses are recoded from der01 (coded by ANES):</i> 0 = males; 1 = females .57
Education	<i>Responses are recoded from der05 (coded by ANES):</i> 0 = High school or less; 1 = some college; 2 = Bachelor's degree; 3 = graduate degree 1.47 (1.00); mode is 1
Racial minority	<i>Responses are recoded from der04 (coded by ANES):</i> 0 = white, non-Hispanic; 1 = black, non-Hispanic or other, non-Hispanic .12
Age Group	<i>Responses are from der02 (coded by ANES)</i> 52.26 (15.04)
Income	<i>Responses are recoded from der06 (coded by ANES):</i> responses are coded into \$25,000/year increments with the highest group as \$150,000 or more. 2.43 (1.78)

Note: The mean and standard deviation are based on un-weighted data. n =2,231

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, these statistical controls only account for other variables measured in the ANES. These controls cannot account for selection bias and the effects of unobserved variables on the model.

<sup>2</sup> The model assessed in this article is intended to be reflective of a broad process of media use and political interest. The measures were broader (similar to, but not exactly like Eveland, et al. 2005; Guo & Moy, 1998; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Shah, et al. 2007; Shah and Scheufele, 2006), rather than focused on a particular election. Despite these measures and the various statistical controls, there may be enduring concerns that the data is idiosyncratic to the 2008 election. To examine the degree to which the results may be specific to the election and the historical context (e.g., economic crisis) in the fall of 2008, I examined how levels of political interest changed from January 2008 through November 2008 using other waves of the ANES 2008-09 panel data. These other waves are based on a sample recruited in late 2007, rather than the two cohorts that are the focus of the analysis in this paper. From January to November, there was slight increase in average level of political interest (2.61 to 2.78) and a slight increase in online news use (3.15 to 3.34), whereas other media uses remained constant. The changes suggest that the fall data (September to October) was not abnormal in relation to political interest and media use, despite the historical context. In terms of how the 2008 election campaign differed from other election campaign, I used the campaign interest variable in the ANES time series data set. Comparing 2004 weighted data to 2008 weighted data suggest very few differences in level of interest in the campaign. In both elections, 16-17% of respondents indicated that they were not much interested in the election campaign, when asked in the two months preceding the election. While the 2008 election was history making for many reasons, the data from the ANES studies (panel, time-series) do not provide conclusive evidence that the election was out of the ordinary in terms of the levels of political interest and media use. That said, the other variables in the ANES may be influenced by historical events.

<sup>3</sup> Within each wave of the ANES panel data (i.e., January, September, October), the higher correlation of political interest and television news was replicated. In addition, the magnitude of the correlations between the different media uses and political interest were consistent in each wave of the ANES panel (correlations were within .03).