Journal of
New Communications
Research

Anthology 2011

A publication of the
Society for
New Communications Research

The Dabblers, Devoted, Developing, and Disinterested: Examining Political Internet Use, Internet Political Sophistication, Political Information Efficacy, and Cynicism

By Kaye D. Sweetser, Ruthann Weaver Lariscy, and Spencer F. Tinkam, Ph.D

Introduction

With each election cycle, more people have been found to turn to the Internet for political information. Indeed, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) recently reported that more than twice as many people — now nearly a quarter of all Americans online (24%) — are using the Internet as an information source than those who did in the 2004 election. With this increase, there has been a media shift from reliance on newspapers and television to an adoption of the Internet as a political source (Pew, 2008). Given the increase of two-way, conversational and so-called social media capabilities of the Internet now, it is apparent that the Internet is more than a one-way broadcast of political information and has become much more interactive. As a result, some might assume that many people could become more engaged in the political process (now socialized online, rather than face-to-face). Yet, it could also be argued that people might want to avoid the Internet and the potential exposure to the "armchair analyst" political discourse that advances in personal publishing have fostered (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Given these options, it seems only fitting that a modern study of the use or possible avoidance of the Internet as a political source would touch on concepts of cynicism (which might be felt by those who might avoid the Internet) or political information efficacy (which might be felt by those who approach the Internet).

Voters of all ages acquire political information from traditional advertising, news outlets, and events, and increasingly from Internet sources (Pew, 2008). Such acquired information plays an integral role in citizens development of trust or mistrust in political leaders; in determination of how much or how little citizens believe they can make a difference; and in decision-making of citizens' regarding their personal involvement and participation in political processes and the voting decisions they make. It is widely known and accepted that the youngest citizens are the most Internet-literate generation (Pew, 2008). Little is known, however, about how their use of the Internet influences their sense of personal political efficacy and their levels of political cynicism.

Youngest citizens are generally regarded as the least knowledgeable and least interested in public affairs and politics of all age groups (Rahn & Transue, 1998); they are known to vote and register with less frequency (Osegueda, 2004) and are often more cynical than their older counterparts (Delli Carpini, 2000). In spite of efforts to politically engage this age demographic, the interest, knowledge, and motivations to participate in the system are not in evidence (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007).

This study seeks to partially fill this void. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between political Web use and both political information efficacy (empowerment) and political cynicism. Employing the political media gratifications scale, this study examines how use of specific political Internet tools relates to one's approach or avoidance of political information on the Web for several age groupings.

Uses and Gratifications

As one of the longer lasting and more developed theories in communication, uses and gratifications plays an important role in the field as it outlines motivations for information acquisition via media (McLeod & Becker, 1974; Blumler & McQuail, 1969). Blumler and McQuail (1969) created the political media gratifications scale containing eight items to measure reasons to watch political broadcasts and nine items to measure the reasons people avoid such broadcasts. This simple approach of examining why one would adopt an information source (approach) or why one might shun another (avoid) is particularly helpful when examining a medium with such clear advantages and disadvantages regarding appropriateness as a political information source.

In the original studies, the gratifications sought from watching political broadcasts clustered into three constructs: political reasons such as reinforcement or vote guidance, surveillance for keeping up with the issues, and excitement such as seeing which party would win (Blumler & McQuail, 1969; Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). These constructs collectively became known as "approaches" to political communication, among other variables. This research also uncovered countervailing tendencies that have become "avoidances," or reasons one might avoid political information on certain media (McLeod & Becker, 1974; Rubin et al., 1994).

During the 1972 presidential election, McLeod and Becker (1974) reported surveillance as the dominant gratification for seeking political information. Surveillance remains high among political information seeking motivations (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). However, there are clearly other motivations for approaching or

avoiding political communication that researchers continue to explore.

Some political effects researchers assert that groups most able to be influenced are those which have the highest degree of apathy. Indeed, Lazardsfeld et al. (1968) note a high degree of inattention during the 1940 presidential election and this trend continues today (Wells, 2003). However, when exposed to campaign events (such as political rallies), voters can become more interested in the election and more knowledgeable about the campaign (Mulder, 1978). Sanders and Kaid (1977) found most people attend a political rally to find out what a candidate is "really like" or to help them decide what the candidate would do if elected.

In addition to using media for political gratifications, other research looks at political gratifications of interpersonal communication. The Kimsey and Atwood (1979) model finds "the voter has a weak early campaign agenda that specifies, in part, the extent to which the person engages in interpersonal communication and uses media for political information" (p. 230). Their research asserts that committed voters seek out interpersonal communication and media to reinforce their predetermined political beliefs (Kimsey & Atwood, 1979). There has been a resurgence of interest in interpersonal communication paralleling the emergence of social media in politics (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Sweetser, Trammell, & Kaid, 2007).

In the past two decades, research regarding online political information seeking has advanced. Specifically, Garramone, Harris, and Anderson (1986) found surveillance to be the key motivation for using computer bulletin board systems. Kaye and Johnson (2002) later examined gratifications for seeking political information online and found the primary motivations to be guidance, information seeking and surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. They also linked media use to political attitudes and behaviors. Kaye and Johnson (2002) reported that information seeking and surveillance are associated with higher interest in politics.

Political Cynicism

Political cynicism is often studied as it is influenced by mediated messages, particularly in advertising and news reports. Extending the standardized polling operational definition beyond lack of "trust in government," cynicism has been defined in communication literature as a "sense of powerlessness" (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998) and as "a feeling that government in general and political leaders in particular do not care about the public's opinions and are not acting in the best interest of the people" (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000).

Historically political cynicism has been studied primarily as an outcome of either (or a combination of) exposure to political advertising, especially negative attack ads, and consumption of high quantities of news. Several studies have documented

increased levels of cynicism among potential voters as a result of negative political ads (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Rahn & Hirshorn, 1999; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). They advance that voters get "fed up with" animosity and "mudslinging" and abandon the system, withdrawing their involvement and ultimately their voting participation. Such findings are not entirely consistent, however. Other studies have found that cynicism is a relatively enduring, stable construct that is little influenced by advertising and news messages (Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002; Kaid & Postelnicu, 2004; Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Yun, & LeGrange, 2007). Some positive impact of negative messages is also demonstrated.

Cynicism may also be related to high amounts of television viewing (Putnam, 1995) filtering through both content and presentation of news. From the video malaise hypothesis (Robinson, 1976), several studies have shown how news actually creates a distance between media and potential voters (Patterson, 1993; Hart, 1994). How media news organizations frame campaign coverage has also been found to increase cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Their findings suggest that when news coverage focuses on the election "game," and candidate strategies, rather than on substantive issues, that voters become more cynical. As with political advertising's role in creating cynicism, however, there is a differing perspective on news, as well. At least one researcher suggests that the sometimes argumentative, critical relationship between the public and the news media is positive in that challenges contribute to knowledge and enhance political participation (Norris, 2000). Other studies counter the Cappella and Jamieson (1997) findings with results that suggest that the "ad watch" (where newscasters examine the veracity of claims made in campaign ads) and other concentrations by news media on electoral strategies (like the mandated "stand by your ad" provision) provide useful information to voters, particularly those who are less involved overall in politics and more uncertain about what to believe (Kim et al., 2007; Tinkham et al., 2002; Weaver Lariscy, & Tinkham, 1999b).

More research on the effects of negative information via media is needed. As noted in one study: "Although media have been blamed oftentimes for fueling political cynicism, the empirical evidence is insufficient and ambiguous" (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002, p. 617). Findings from one of these authors' cynicism studies of Danish voters demonstrated that turnout to vote was unaffected even while voters held relatively high levels of cynicism throughout a campaign, that negativity increased over the course of the campaign, and that higher levels of exposure to political news during the campaign increased cynicism (de Vreese & Semetko, 2002).

"Spiral of cynicism" is the term used to describe the destructive, spiraling effect of negativity in campaign information that is accused of fueling cynicism and

distrust, which, in turn, leads to erosion of civic engagement and political participation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hibbing & Theiss-Moore, 1995). While conducted outside the U.S. and outside the context of an election, findings from one recent study indicate that the relationship between news media and political cynicism is contingent upon many factors and that cynicism has a negligible impact on citizen participation (de Vreese, 2005). This study also found that persons higher in efficacy were less cynical than persons low in efficacy, and that high political sophistication contributes to heightened cynicism. This suggests that cynicism is not always a "bad" thing; that it may, in fact, be an indication of "an interested and critical citizenry" (de Vreese, 2005, p. 294). This highly heuristic suggestion is one that motivates examination in this study.

Political sophistication is measured in many different ways and much debate surrounds how it is defined (Luskin, 1987; Price, 2000). It is often conceptualized as the quantity and organization of information and the cognitions derived from that information that persons possess when thinking about politics (Luskin & Bullock, 2004). Luskin & Bullock (2004) highlight the distinctions made between *information* (which may or may not be accurate nor organized) and *knowledge* (which is correct information). It is beyond the scope of the current investigation to consider the body of research that debates both the definitions of political sophistication and, depending on the definition, the influence it may have on political cynicism, efficacy, and involvement (for a thorough discussion of the issue, see Luskin, 2002).

Political Information Efficacy

Another internal voting deterrent scholars have reported among the electorate is caused by the lack of political information efficacy. The term political information efficacy refers to the feeling that one has enough information about politics to make a difference. Theoretically, political information efficacy posits that exposure to specific types of political information leads to different levels of information processing (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). Information source and medium, then, play a key role in determining one's feeling of efficaciousness. For example, Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) reported that Pew found Internet users were among a group of noticeably more informed voters. While a hotly debated topic in political communication research (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007), campaign sources such as advertisements and debates have also found to increase political information efficacy (Kaid, Landreville, Postelnicu, & Martin, 2005).

Young people, especially, have been plagued by the negative effects of political information efficacy (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007), as Murphy (2000) reported when young voters replied that they avoided casting a ballot because they did not feel

that they had "enough time or information" to make an informed decision. Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2000; 2004) continued to examine this phenomena and found further support that low levels of political information efficacy contribute significantly to young people not voting. Later research revealed ways to reduce the negative impact of low political information efficacy in that young voters exposed to campaign-produced information (*e.g.,* debates, ads) showed increased levels of political information efficacy (Kaid, Landreville, Postelnicu, & Martin, 2005). Rahn and Hirshorn (1999) found that young people with relatively high levels of political efficacy feel stimulated and motivated as a result of negative ads; other studies document that such ads are often judged as entertaining, informative and useful in making voting decisions (Weaver Lariscy & Tinkham, 1999). Along these lines, men display higher levels of political information efficacy than women after viewing candidate materials (Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Yun, & LeGrange, 2007). According to Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Yun, & LeGrange (2007), while political information efficacy increased, cynicism among participants in that experiment did not change, which suggests that PIE and cynicism operate independently.

These findings illustrate that increasing political information efficacy provides hope. That is, if voters have confidence in information and knowledge about politics and campaigns, then they are more likely to exercise their right to vote. However, those wishing to engage young people face additional challenges in that young voters process information differently than older voters and rely on different (non-traditional) sources (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). As such, this research seeks to understand the relationship between the use or non-use of a popular non-traditional political medium (the Internet) and political information efficacy and cynicism.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed, this study is guided by two overarching research questions:

RQ1: How are approaching/avoiding the Internet for political information, Internet political sophistication, political information efficacy, and political cynicism related? How do these vary based on age?

RQ2: What impact does approach/avoidance of political information on the Internet and Internet political sophistication have on political information efficacy and cynicism? How do these Internet motivations and behaviors interact to produce political information efficacy and political cynicism.

Method

Using a randomly selected sample, we conducted an online survey in the days immediately surrounding the 2006 midterm election. Respondents asked to participate in the IRB-approved survey via e-mail. The invitation text was modeled after Porter and Whitcomb's (2003) suggestions and included both a selectivity statement ("*you* were selected for this study because ... ") and deadline.

Sample

A random sample of voting-aged adults was used for this survey. The overall response rate of approximately 12% is similar to other published studies that have used online surveys (Porter & Whitcomb, 2003; Sweetser, Trammell, & Kaid, 2007, Sha & Toth, 2005). Of the 1,834 respondents who completed the survey, data from 1,591 cases were determined to be usable in that that participants were eligible to vote and completed more than two-thirds of the questions on the survey.

Respondents ranged from 18- to 85-years-of-age, with a mean age of approximately 32-years-old. The median age was 25-years-old. Respondents were statistically broken into four demographic cohorts: 18-21, 22-25, 26-39, and those 40-years-of-age or older.

Instrument

There were three main measurements employed in this survey: political media gratifications scale, political cynicism scale, and a political information efficacy scale. Additionally, respondents were asked to indicate which Internet-based political tools they used. Finally, demographic questions were asked.

The political media gratifications scale consists of two sets of measures used in conjunction with one another to measure why someone uses a particular medium for political content and why one would avoid political content. Here, we focused on approach/avoidance motives toward the Internet as a political communication source. Typically, each scale is indexed (Perse, 1994); therefore, indexing was done with this data. All of the political approach items together yielded a Cronbach's inter-item correlation coefficient alpha score of .72, and the alpha of the avoidance items was .76.

Political cynicism questions on the survey aid in determining the level of cynicism the respondent has in regard to politicians and government (Rosenstone et al., 1997; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). Three of these items were adapted from prior scales used in National Election Studies (Rosenstone et al., 1997), and the remainder were developed and used in three previous presidential campaigns to measure levels of political cynicism (Kaid et al., 2000). The alpha for this index was .63. This alpha score is consistent with other uses of this scale, especially when

measured in a pre-test.

The three-item information efficacy index indicated to what extent the respondent feels he or she is knowledgable about politics. Information efficacy describes the understanding of the respondent's feelings about the adequacy of political information in relation to political participants (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2004). This index was reliable for those surveyed (Cronbach's a = .86).

Internet political sophistication in this study is an indicant of the number and variety of Internet political sites and tools an individual indicates he or she uses for political information. As such, it is in line with traditional conceptualizations of political socialization (previously discussed) in that we consider the amount of different information sources on the Internet — quantity of political information is often one component of traditional conceptualizations. However, political sophistication is unlike other measures of sophistication in that we do not consider how the information is used, how the individual organizes it cognitively, or whether the individual stores the information. Since we are dealing with Internet sophistication, we advance that the number of political venues an individual uses online (chat rooms, social media, blogs, websites, etc) is an excellent definition of the sophistication we desired to tap. A set of 12 specific Internet-based political activities were listed, and respondents were asked to indicate whether they had used each tool. These actions were summed into a 12-item index score indicating how many Internet tools each respondent used. The actions include: (1) e-mail political or issue-orientated organizations; (2) search for political information online; (3) send political e-postcards; (4) read a candidate's blog; (5) read a blog (non-candidate) that talked about political issues; (6) list a candidate you support through the "election" tab in your Facebook profile; (7) list an issue you care about through the "election" tab in your Facebook profile; (8) list your political ideology in an online social networking software system (Facebook, Myspace); (9) sign an e-petition; (10) watch political/issue-orientated videos on sites like YouTube; (11) write on candidate's Facebook wall; or (12) write an e-mail to a candidate on Facebook.

Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, scores were standardized, correlated, and subjected to a one-way MANOVA across age groups. Following this, a three-way MANCOVA was performed in which age in years served as a covariate. The three independent variables in this analysis were approach to the Internet for political information, avoidance of the Internet for political information, and Internet political sophistication indices. The dependent variables consisted of political information efficacy and political cynicism indices.

Results

We began our analyses with a series of explorations into the relationships between persons' motivations for using or avoiding the Internet for political information. We were particularly interested in the relatively new notion of Internet sophistication among voters of different ages in the use of these rapidly developing political communication tools. The first research exploratory area considers how these variables interrelate and how they are related to age.

A cursory examination of Figure 1 reveals that the five constructs of interest in this study exhibit different slope relationships among each other. Considering first the independent variables, Internet political sophistication is positively correlated with approach ($r = .26$, $p \leq .01$) and negatively correlated with avoidance ($r = -.25$, $p \leq .01$). Not surprisingly, approach and avoidance motives are negatively but weakly correlated with each other ($r = -.09$, $p \leq .01$). This suggests that motives to avoid and approach the Internet as a political information source operate relatively independently of one another. With respect to the dependent variables, political information efficacy and cynicism were negatively correlated ($r = -.26$, $p \leq .01$). The overall pattern exhibits significant (given the large sample) but weak interrelations for both the independent and dependent variables, thus justifying treating these constructs separately in our model.

Figure 1 further reports the variables considered here as they relate to age. Used as a variate, the five constructs collectively are significantly related to age ($p < .001$). First consider the general political orientations and dependent variables, efficacy and cynicism. Note that across the four age cohorts political efficacy exhibits a significant and positive slope, meaning that older voters possess higher political efficacy than do the younger voting groups (F=25.931, p<.001). In contrast, the level of political cynicism does not exhibit a similar significant pattern (F<1, ns). Turning now to motivations for relying on the Internet for political information, Figure 1 indicates that positive, or "approach" motivations, are significantly and negatively related to age (F=10.811, p<.001). That is, older people are less motivated and less attracted to online political information. In contrast, "avoidance" motives are not significantly related to age (F<1, ns), indicating that older people are no less "turned off" by the prospect of Internet political information activities; there is likely some other explanation.

Recall that Internet political sophistication is conceptualized by the breadth of Internet functions that voters use to accumulate and generate political communication.

Internet political sophistication like approach motives described previously, is significantly and negatively related to age (F=11.618, p<.001). Those age groups

which are more drawn to political Internet sources exhibit a wider variety of uses of *all* of those sources. The multivariate patterns exhibited in Figure 1 provide the rationale for including age as a covariate in our comprehensive predictive model.

The second broad research question considers the impact of motivations for seeking or avoiding Internet political media, as well as the breadth of political Internet use (Internet political sophistication) on the important constructs of political information efficacy and political cynicism. Table 1 as well as Figures 2 and 3 summarize the results of a MANCOVA analysis in which Internet political sophistication, and motives for approaching and/or avoiding the Internet for political information, serve as fixed factors predicting political efficacy and political cynicism, with age-in-years entered as a covariate. The full factorial model is a

Figure 1. Standardized Means of Independent and Dependent Variables Across Four Age Cohorts.
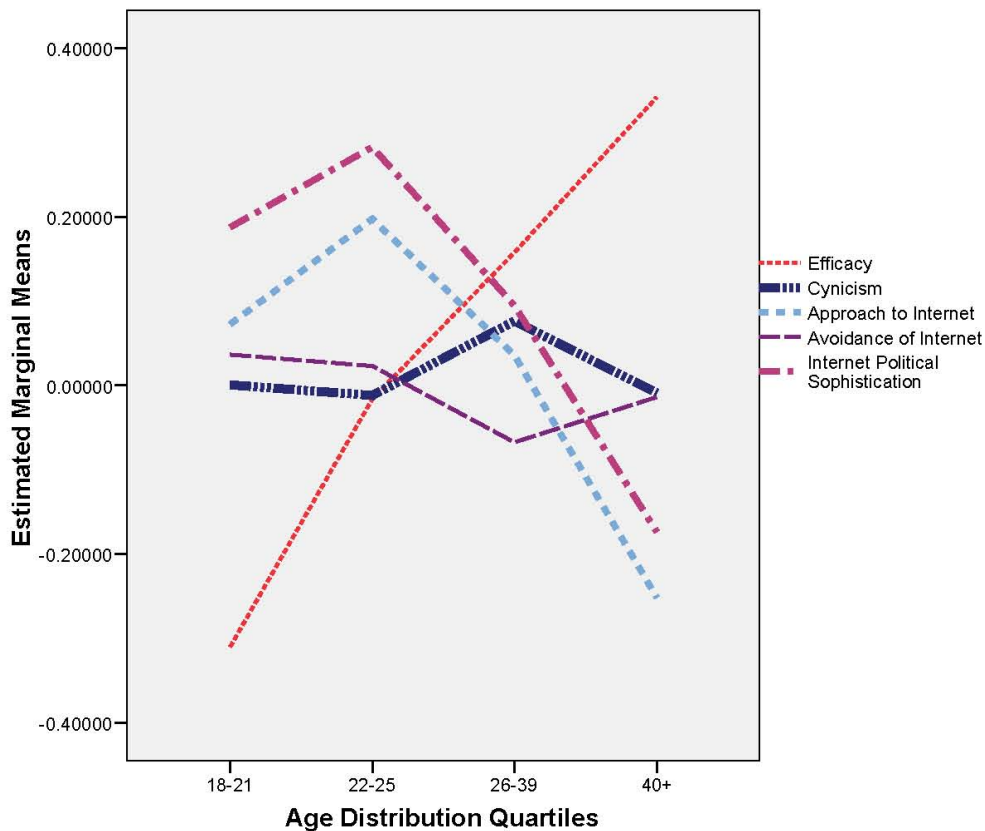
Note: *Raw mean scores for independent variables are: political Internet approach motives (M = 3.29, SD = .54771, based on five-unit Likert scales, political Internet avoidance motives (M = 2.83, SD = .69682, based on five-unit Likert scales), political Internet sophistication (M = 2.92, SD = 2.24422, based on 13-unit index score, ranging 0-12). Alpha reliabilities for the independent variables are approach (a = .72), avoidance (a = .76). Raw mean scores for dependent variables are: political information efficacy (M = 3.70, SD = .90191, based on five-unit Likert scales) and political cynicism (M = 3.07, SD = .54771, based on five-point Likert scales. Alpha reliable for the dependent variables are: political information efficacy (a = .86), cynicism (a = .63).*

2X2X2 multivariate design. It is important to note here that the covariate and every factor significantly contribute additively (all, p<.001) to the dependent variate (efficacy + cynicism). In addition, one significant two-way interaction is observed — sophistication X approach motivation (p<.01).

Table 1 reports the statistical univariate results. Note that the multivariate effect of age is accounted for only by its effect on efficacy, consistent with the results reported in Figure 1. Similarly, the Internet political sophistication factor influenced only the level of political efficacy. In contrast, the approach motivation, as well as the avoidance motivation, significantly impacted both dependent variables (efficacy and cynicism) in the dependent variate, as did the significant interaction. The model

Table 1. Tests of Between-Subjects Main and Interaction Effects: Internet Political Sophistication and Motivations as Predictors of Political Efficacy and Cynicism

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
Covariate					
Age in years[1]	Efficacy	60.363	1	99.921	.000*
	Cynicism	.183	1	.693	.405
Main effects					
Internet Political Sophistication[2]	Efficacy	54.679	1	90.511	.000*
	Cynicism	.014	1	.052	.820
Approach Motives	Efficacy	16.676	1	27.603	.000*
	Cynicism	3.903	1	14.753	.000*
Avoidance Motives	Efficacy	46.696	1	77.297	.000*
	Cynicism	33.042	1	124.883	.000*
Two-way interactions					
Sophistication × Approach	Efficacy	4.235	1	7.010	.008*
	Cynicism	1.053	1	3.980	.046*
Sophistication × Avoidance	Efficacy	1.612	1	2.668	.103
	Cynicism	.148	1	.559	.455
Approach × Avoidance	Efficacy	.620	1	1.027	.311
	Cynicism	.118	1	.446	.505
Three-way interactions					
Sophistication × Approach × Avoidance	Efficacy	.439	1	.727	.394
	Cynicism	.079	1	.297	.586

Note: R^2 = .257 (Adjusted R^2 = .251), R^2 = .140 (Adjusted R^2 = .133), [1]Mean Age : 31.4 (*SD* = 13.25778). [2]Scores for Internet Political Sophistication, Approach Motives, and Avoidance Motives split at their median values.
*p < .05.

accounts for more explained variance (25.4%) in efficacy than it does in explaining cynicism (14.0%).

Figure 2 presents the form of the significant main and two-way interaction effects for efficacy involving approach motivations and Internet political sophistication. Note that those with high approach motivations exhibit generally higher levels of efficacy than do those with greater Internet political sophistication. The combination of high sophistication and high approach motives yields disproportionately higher levels of efficacy than any other combination. Low approach motives and sophistication similarly are disproportionately low in efficacy.

In Figure 3 the two-way interaction between approach motivation and sophistication, as well as main effects of each, are observed. Those with high approach motives show less cynicism than those with low approach motives; whereas cynicism is not related to level of sophistication. This results in the disordinal interaction in which the slope of the relationship between sophistication and cynicism varies for those with low-versus-high approach motives. For those high in approach motivation, greater sophistication is associated with disproportionately

Figure 2. Two Way Interaction Between Political Sophistication and Approach Motives for Efficacy
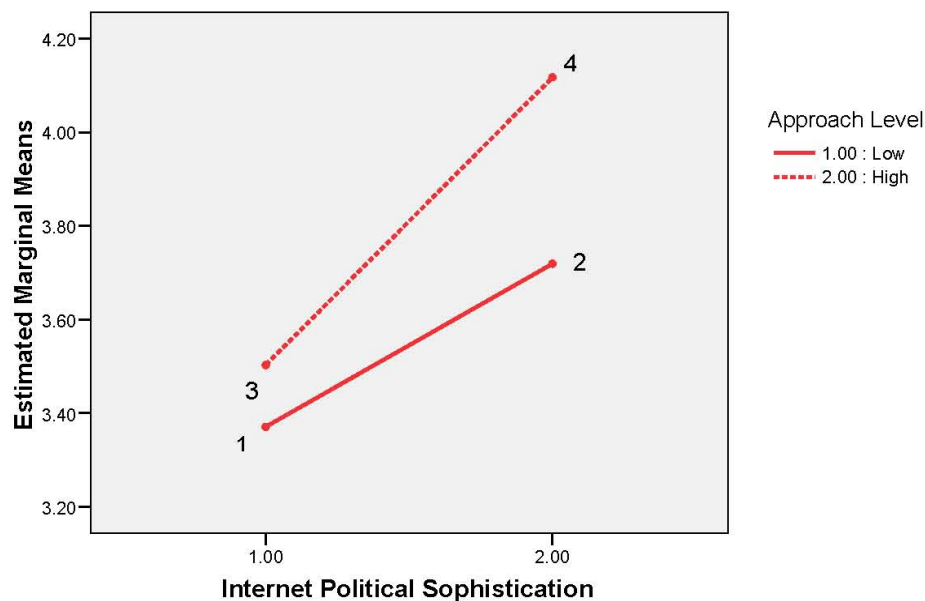
Note: Mean political efficacy = 3.6960 (*SD* = .90191) on a 1-5 Likert scale, with higher scores representing greater political efficacy.
1: Disinterested, 2: Dabblers, 3: Developing 4: Devoted.

Figure 3. Two Way Interaction Between Political Sophistication and Approach Motives for Cynicism
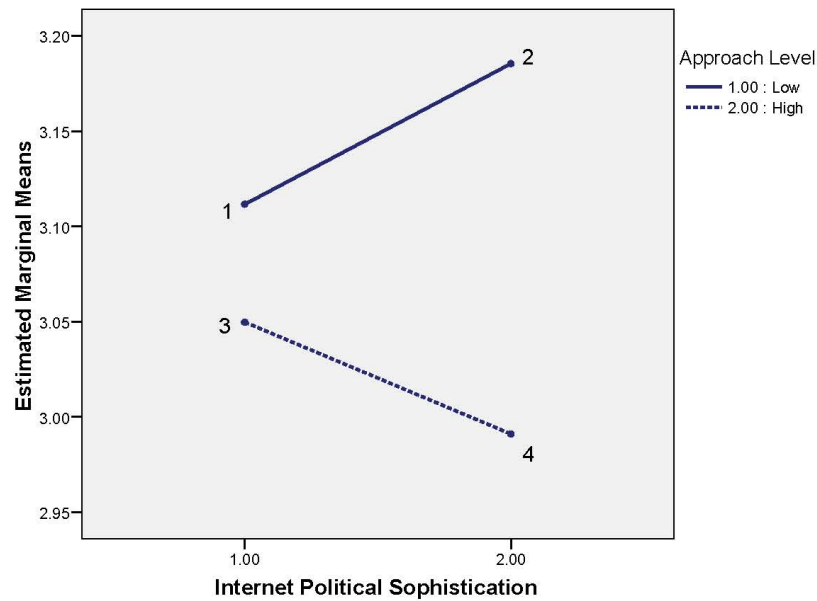
Note: Mean political cynicism = 3.0660 (S*D* = .54771) based on a one-to-five Likert scale, with higher scores representing greater political cynicism.
1: Disinterested, 2: Dabblers, 3: Developing 4: Devoted.

low levels of cynicism; for those low in approach motivation, greater levels of political sophistication result in disproportionately high levels of cynicism.

Discussion

This research advances uses and gratifications research in that it revises a line of research that not only focuses on the use of media, but also the calculated non-use of particular media for Internet-based political communication. Like some previous studies, our research confirms that young people use the Internet more and they use it for more diverse reasons than any other age group. We further confirm that age is not the only explanatory variable that influences political information efficacy. Our study contributes the additional variable of Internet political sophistication that had previously not been considered in uses and gratifications research. Only when we consider both motivations and actual Internet behaviors do we see a truer picture of how uses and gratifications are related to political information efficacy and cynicism. That is, by focusing only on motivations underlying efficacy and cynicism, our sophistication index taps into the reported overt Internet behaviors.

Our findings further confirm what previous researchers found, in that cynicism

and political information efficacy operate relatively independently of one another. Much scholarship assumes that efficacy is a positive state and cynicism, on the other hand, is negative (Robinson, 1976; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). Similarly, one might posit that approach motives are healthy, while avoidance motives are detrimental. Indeed, our findings indicate that high avoidance motivations are strongly related to cynicism, whereas those individuals high in approach motivations are not necessarily low in cynicism. Our sophistication index is helpful in understanding this conundrum. For example, people with low approach (*e.g.,* don't seek out political information Internet) could be classified as highly sophisticated if they use a variety of Internet activities. We call these "dabblers." They are high in sophistication because they use a high number and variety of Internet sources; however, they are, in fact, the most cynical group. The polar opposite of our dabblers is a group we call the "devoted." In contrast with the dabblers, this group is high in approach, highest in efficacy, and least cynical. Like the dabblers, the devoted are highly sophisticated and we speculate that their breadth of usage is different. For example, the data show that this group relies on specific online political information sources (hence the label "devoted") rather than a sampling of more diverse sources. The next group, the "disinterested," are low on approach, low in sophistication, lowest of all groups on efficacy, and moderately cynical. These disinterested are not particularly drawn to the Internet for political information, nor do they use it extensively. Of all of groups, the disinterested believe that they do not have enough information to make a qualified decision, perhaps appropriately. Finally, "the developing" are high in approach, low in sophistication, moderately cynical, and moderate in political information efficacy. This group is clearly interested in the Internet as a source of political information, but for a variety of reasons which we can only speculate (*e.g.,* time, skills, opportunity), they are unable to actualize their interest.

Thinking in terms of the ideal voter based on our groupings above, it is hard not to notice that those who are moderately to highly efficacious have varying levels of cynicism. Knowing that efficaciousness leads to voting (even though cynicism has been accused of causing disenfranchisement), it perhaps gives us reason to reflect on the overall role of cynicism as an inhibitor of political activity. Much U.S.-based research takes the position that cynicism leads to apathy and disenfranchisement, and the highest levels of cynicism can lead to a degradation of government entirely. We take a more European view of cynicism (de Vreese, 2005), suggesting that even a high amount of cynicism doesn't squelch political efficacy; that a moderate level of cynicism may in fact be "healthy" for an informed, involved electorate.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The survey method is inherently problematic as it relies on self-report rather than actual observation. Along these lines, we did not consider vote intention, as we first wanted to understand use in relation to possible barrier variables (lack of political information efficacy or cynicism). Additionally, we did not fully examine information processing; rather, we concentrated on usage. Certainly more research in all of these areas must be conducted to more fully understand the concepts and connections discussed here.

Future Research

The findings here leave room for many future directions in research. Regarding sophistication, are there certain Internet tools that one of the four types of people we identified rely on more? How often are they using these tools? How does use (approach/avoidance and sophistication), political information efficacy, and cynicism predict actual voting behavior? What role do all of these variables have in political participation? Certainly, the research here only sheds light on a very small piece of understanding barrier to political participation and information-seeking behavior, yet these findings lay the groundwork for much further inquiry.

References

Ansolabehere, S. & Iyengar S. (1995). Going Negative: How political advertisements shrink and polarize the electorate. New York: Free Press

Ansolabehere, S., Iyengar, S. & Simon, A. (1999). Replicating experiments using aggregate and survey data; The case of negative advertisement and turnout. American Political Science Review 93: 891-900.

Cappella, J.N. & K. H. Jamieson (1997). Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good. New York: ;Oxford University Press.

de Vreese, C.H. & Semetko, H.A. (2002). "Cynical and engaged: Strategic campaign coverage, public opinion, and mobilization in a referendum." Communication Research 29:6, 615-641.

de Vreese, C.H. (2005). "The spiral of cynicism reconsidered." European Journal of Communication 20:3, 283-301.

Easton, David (1975). "A re-assessment of the concept of political support," British Journal of Political Science 5: 435-457.

Erber, Ralph & Richard Lau (1990). "Political cynicism revisited: An information-processing reconciliation of policy-based and incumbency-based interpretations of changes in trust in government," American Journal of Political Science 34(1): 236-253.

Hart, R.P.(1994). Seducing America: How television charms the American voter (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Hibbing, J.R. & Theiss-Moore, E. (1998). "The media's role in public negativity towards Congress: Distinguishing emotional reactions and cognitive evaluations." American Journal of Political Science 42: 475-498.

Kaid, L.L., M. McKinney, and J. Tedesco (2000). Civic dialogue in the 1996 presidential campaign: Candidate, media, and public voices. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.

Kaid, L.L., M. McKinney, and J. Tedesco (2007). Political information efficacy and young voters. American Behavioral Scientist 50(9): 1093-1111.

Kaid, L.L. & M. Postelnicu (2005). "Political advertising and the responses of young voters: Comparison of traditional television and internet messages," American Behavioral Scientist 49(2): 265-278.

Kim, Hana, Spencer F. Tinkham, and Ruthann W. Lariscy (2007), "Public Policies and Political Advertising: What Do Source Disclosure, Message Valence, and Repetition Achieve?" presented to the Marketing and Public Policy annual conference, June.

Langer, Gary (2002). "Trust in government. . . to do what?" Public Perspective, July/August, 7-11.

Luskin, R.C. (2002). "From denial to extenuation (and finally beyond): Political sophistication and citizen performance." Thinking About Political Psychology, J H. Kuklinski (ed). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Luskin, R.C. (1987). "Measuring political sophistication." American Journal of Political Science 31(4): 856-899.

Luskin, R.C. & Bullock, J. (2004). "Re: Measuring Political Sophistication." Retrieved 2/10/08, www.stanford.edu/class/polisci353/2004fall

Norris, P. (2000). A virtuous circle. Political communications in postindustrial societies. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Osegueda, M. (2004). Rap the vote: Hip-hop celebs are out to inspire fans to vote. Fresno Bee. Retrieved September 7, 2005, LexisNexis database.

Patterson, T.(1993). Out of order. New York: Knopf.

Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008). The Internet gains in politics. Available online: http://pewinternet.org/pdfs/Pew_MediaSources_jan08.pdf, retrieved February 10, 2008.

Pinkleton, B. E., E.W. Austin, & K. K. Fortman (1998). "Relationships of media use and political disaffection to political efficacy and voting behavior," Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media 42: 34-49.

Pinkleton, B.E., Um, N.H., & E.W. Austin (2002). "An exploration of the effects of negative advertising on political decision making." Journal of Advertising 31(1): 13-25.

Putnam, R.D. (1995) "Turning in, turning out: The strange disappearance of social capital in America." PS: Political Science and Politics 28: 664-683.

Rahn, W. and Transue, J. (1998). Social trust and value change: The decline of social capital in American youth, 1976-1995. *Political Psychology*, 19, 545-565.

Rahn, W.M. & R.Ml Hirshorn (1999). "Political advertising and public mood: A study of children's political orientations," Political Communication 16: 387-407.

Robinson, M. J. (1976). "Public affairs television and the growth of political malaise," American Political Science Review 70: 409-432.

Tinkham, Spencer F. and Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy, "Ethical Judgments of Political Television Commercials as Predictors of Attitude Toward the Ad," Journal of Advertising, Special Issue on Ethics in Advertising, 23(3), 1994, 43-58.

Tinkham, Spencer F., Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy, Yongjun Sung, and Andrew L. Hall, "Should Negative Political Advertising be Regulated? Empirical Implications for 'Stand by Your Ad' Legislation," presented to the AMA Marketing and Public Policy Conference, Atlanta, GA, May, 2002.

Trammell, K.D., & Keshelashvili, A. (2005). Examining the new influencers: A self-presentation study of A-List blogs. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 968 – 982.

Weaver Lariscy, Ruth Ann and Spencer F. Tinkham,(1999b)"Watching the Adwatch: Does it Make a Difference? Should it?" Presented to the Political Communication Division, International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA, May, 1999.

Weaver Lariscy, Ruth Ann and Spencer F. Tinkham, (1999a) "The Sleeper Effect and Negative Political Advertising," Journal of Advertising 28(4) 13-30.

Kaye D. Sweetser is an associate professor at the University of Georgia's H.W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Florida in 2004. She was previously a Research Fellow for the Society of New Communications Research.

Ruthann Weaver Lariscy is a professor of public relations at the University of Georgia's H.W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Missouri.

Spencer F. Tinkham is a professor of advertising at the University of Georgia's H.W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.