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Perception through a Computer Screen

We live in the golden age of communication and information. Communication and information has embedded itself within our society. You can be anywhere in the world and be connected to all your friends and family by a simple device in your pocket. You can find out what is happening on the other side of the world in near real time. You can learn something new in seconds that years ago would have taken weeks. This is all thanks to many technological advances and one in particular which the internet is. The internet has changed a lot on how we interact with one another and how we receive information. We now have Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and blogs to get our news. But the perspective of the media has changed on how we receive it and who we receive it from. It is a new frontier that has many possibilities to come from it.

In 2003, the internet started to play a major role in the campaign world with the Howard Deans Campaign. Unlike the traditional methods used to fundraise, Howard Dean used the internet to his advantage. Howard Dean said “Dick Cheney was holding a $2,000-a-plate fundraising lunch, so we asked Americans all over the country to join me the same day for a lunch in front of their computers (Wired).” Allowing people to make small contributions he was able to match his opponent’s numbers without having to find huge donors.  This progressed to what we see today with the Obama campaign creating an internet community that was not previously tapped into. These new sources of funds could be what caused for the escalating cost of running an election. Now costing as much as 2 billion dollars between both candidates to seek an office like president (Ashkenas, Ericson, Parlapiano). This new way to contribute to a campaign has shifted how the candidates fundraise, not looking at only the rich people for large sums of money but rather everyday people for a small contribution.

Before the internet there were only a few ways for people to get their news. This included newspapers, radio, television, and word of mouth. After the advent of the internet this increased the number of sources by millions. We now have everyday people giving their opinions and their coverage of the news alongside news companies. Some may think that with the increase of sources that it would further educate the readers. The unforeseen effect is it creates unreliable sources that people can no longer trust. The news cycle no longer ends when the sun goes down, it continues throughout the night with stories constantly breaking. This has caused not only a loss of trust in news sources online, but all mass media. There was a poll done by Gallup surveying the amount of trust that people have in the government and since 1998 the opinions have drastically changed. Back in 1998 most people said that they had a “Great deal or Fair amount” of trust in mass media, which was before the internet was a primary source for the news(Gallup). In about 2004 people’s opinions started to shift, and this was the first time that a majority of people no longer had trust in mass media. Today there is a massive gap between the amount of trust and distrust with almost a 20 percent differential. The internet has increased the amount of news that people receive but has caused them to question what they are receiving and what is true.

According to the Gallup poll the trust in the media varies by the political parties. Many people have said, especially during the last presidential election, that the televised mass media has a liberal lean to it. This is apparent in the Gallup poll by the decrease of the Republican Party over the years. Back in the year 2002 the Republican Party had a high of 49 percent of trust in the media, while the Democratic Party had 59 percent in favor of the media. Today the separation is much larger with Democrats still at 58 percent and the Republican Party at a low of 26 percent. Over the years however, the Republican Party has paid closer attention to the National Political news from 29 percent in 2002 and now at 48 percent and rising. These trends has caused many people to take their own actions towards government.

The White House has responded to people’s new ability to voice their opinion on the internet with a website called *We The People*. Everyone has the chance to start a petition and collect signatures for an issue that they care about. They even guarantee a response from the White House if they reach more than 100,000 signatures in 30 days. Some of the petitions that have gotten the most attention include: petitions to “Legally recognize Westboro Baptist Church as a hate group” or “Stop the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act.” (Whitehouse.gov) This has allowed the government to create an agenda that the American people believe in. There has been some abuse for these petitions as well. Those include a petition for the United States to create a Death Star. Some people have used these websites to make their message be known while others have used it to make their jokes be heard.

Many people have taken the initiative and fought from issues that they care about and used the internet to spread their agenda. A recent example of this is the Kony 2012 campaign that started with a video on YouTube. The company that started this was Invisible Children Inc. and tried to stop the Militia Leader known as Joseph Kony (Invisible Children). This got so much attention because of their ability to go viral with the film. Today the video has almost had 100,000,000 views (Youtube.com). The video starts out with them talking about how the internet has changed how we live and how we are all connected and the role that the government plays. They talk about a boy named Jacob who lost his brother and that this man named Joseph Kony was the cause of it. The organization Invisibles Children’s mission was to make people aware using the internet to stop this man. The reaction of people to this video was for them to be part of the movement by buying the awareness kit to spread the word. They ended up being able to get international forces to respond to this issue purely by the involvement of the internet community.

Today it is much more difficult for a politician to try and put a spin on a speech or debate that they are doing. With all the information that everyone has at their fingertips this allows people to find out the truth. There are websites that are online that are dedicated to finding what a politician is lying about or what they are spinning the truth on. One of these websites is factcheck.org and it goes in depth with the information in speeches. Most recently the website went through the President’s State of the Union address and shed light on each topic that the president talked about. They pull information from all different sources such as press releases from the White House to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Brooks, Factcheck.org). This information would not be possible before the internet due to the amount of information they would need to gather. Websites like these allow the American people to know the truth about what a politician is saying but also causes distrust in what they say based off statistical facts.

Politicians today interact with the public a lot more than they did back before the internet. A politician could call a press conference or interview with a newspaper to get their story out. But today with social media the elected body can talk right to their constituents. This really took off during the presidential election between John McCain and Barack Obama. Obama has a twitter page with 27 million followers and updates multiple times a day (Jacobs, Huffington Post). This is a new dynamic for the people that follow him.  They feel a direct connection between the top office in the country and the everyday American. This can also be the cause for many headaches. Another website called Politwoops has made sure that politicians should proofread before they post anything on Twitter. The website consists of posting all the tweets that a politician deleted. An attempt to inform the public today has to be much more thought out than before the internet due to the fact that whatever you say will stay on the internet long after your term is over.

NBC, ABC, CBS are all the news outlets that many of us have grown up with and to many a trusted news source. These were the groups that broke all the news stories and were the first people on the scene. In today’s day in age, this is no longer true with the amount of news breaking on the internet. The first time this was a major factor was when the internet was young back in the late 90’s. On January 17th, 1998 a News aggregation site called the *Drudge report* broke a story before anyone else. This was the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Originally a story killed by Newsweek magazine that the Drudge report dove deeper into. The head line simply read “BLOCKBUSTER REPORT: 23-YEAR OLD, FORMER WHITE HOUSE INTERN, SEX RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT.” (DrudgeReportArchives.com) This was a milestone for the internet’s ability to be a reliable news source and allowed it to gain traction.

The internet has given people much more ability to see the details about how a campaign is going during election season. Every day there are updates on what are the approval ratings and the likelihood of each candidate getting elected. One of these websites is RealClearPolitics, they compile all the polling companies such as Fox News, Gallup, Rasmussen and many others (RealClearPolitics). This is a very new way to look at politics. Before the opinion of how the President was doing or how someone would vote was done only by the news outlets. Every morning people now have the chance to check how a candidate is doing in the races. The problem with this is that the news is reporting these polls more than what the candidates are actually doing and this is known as horse race politics. This gives people more information about how each one of the candidates is doing but not what they are doing.

Politicians have stood on stages for years telling us what they believe in and what they are going to do about it. Some of them want to convey an opinion that pleases as many people as possible and acting in the middle. Before the internet, people had to intercept those words how they felt it meant. After the internet came along websites were created that put it plain and simple on how a politician stood on specific issues the voters care about. Websites such as ontheissues.org gives people a simple look at the person that represents them and how they feel on specific issues (Ontheissues.org). They look at the voting records of the politicians, the money that they accepted from lobbyist, and what they said in specific speeches. Compiling the information and delivering it to the people using the internet has made it much harder for the politicians to please everyone but gives the voter more information. These websites on the internet have allowed voters to simply vote on the issues instead of the person that will be representing them.

Giving people access to large amounts of information has many advantages but can also be a problem when it comes to what information that is accessible. With the amount of valuable information on the internet there will always be hackers. The group that has gotten the most amount of attention in recent history is the activist group known as Wikileaks. The founder Julian Assange has been responsible for releasing large amounts of documents that were never supposed to be seen by the everyday person. Some of the most popular of the documents that were released included what is known as the Iraq War logs, which described the total amounts of deaths that accrued in attacks by insurgents. Around April of 2011 they released more documents, a total of 779 secret documents, about war criminals in Guantanamo Bay detention camp (Leigh, Ball, Cobain,Burke; The Guardian). After these documents were released it caused much controversy between the media, government, and the people all around the world. The internet is made for information to be shared and if it on the internet it is much more accessible to people than before. Since the internet started there has been a larger security concern with information getting into the wrong hands and the implication of it. This is a new threat that we have to deal with now that people can gain so much knowledge with a simple click of a button.

There are many people that talk about the bias in the mainstream media on political parties and how one may lean much further left or right than the other. A study done by the Pew Researching Center has found that although there is a lot of negative news on the main stream that the social media news is much worse. The Mainstream media during the Obama and Romney campaign had only 19 percent and 15 percent positive news coverage on each candidate respectfully (Journalism.org).  When it came to negative reporting it was up to 30 percent and 28 percent for each candidate. When the campaign was reported on social media sites, the amount of negative reporting was as high as 62 percent on Facebook and 58 percent on Twitter. With people that had political blogs they fell within the same range of positive reporting as the news but with almost 15 percent higher in negative reporting. Although the mainstream media has a healthy mix between their positive and negative tones, the social media on the other hand is overwhelmingly negative. There are many people that do not follow the political news at all but constantly use websites like Facebook and Twitter. This will inform them the wrong way about each candidate by only knowing the negative about the candidates that they dislike and not knowing the issues about either of them. With the internet gaining ground for distributing news it isn’t focusing on the issue but rather just bashing the other people that they dislike. This may be an easier way to report stories and get attention but it is not the role of the media with is to educate and inform the public.

In 2011 there were protests throughout Egypt over the President Zine al-bidine. The protest were held by a younger group of Egyptians that used the internet to their advantage. The protest did not gain ground by flyers, meetings, or the news but rather something new, the social media. The protesters made groups on Facebook to organize the time and places of the protest. The government of Egypt quickly caught on with what the citizens were doing and they reacted. They started to block such sites as Twitter and Facebook and it escalated to blocking mobile phone networks and finally turning off the internet to all of Egypt. On January 28th the people fought back to the government over their loss of freedom.  Even though the internet was cut off the tracks for the protest were already set in place. The protests were reported on the national news stations such as Al-Jazeera throughout the day. According to an article on the BBC an Egyptian activist said “People learn quickly. They look at who is calling for a protest, and if it is someone they know and trust they are much more likely to take part.”(Alexander) The ability for people to communicate allows them to stand up against the government and speak their mind. Although many governments have reacted to these threats the ideas spread quicker than the government can react.

Technology has allowed people to capture the events that are happening around them on video. One of the main websites that everyone knows is YouTube and Liveleaks. According to the site an average of 4 billion hours of video is uploaded to the site every month. 70% of the traffic that the website receives is outside of the United States (youtube.com). This is another step that has brought the internet community to be more aware of what is going on. During this recent Campaign Presidential candidate Mitt Romney got in trouble with a video recording of him at a campaign dinner. He was caught saying that many people just want handouts don’t actually want to get a job. This was an acceptable view to express to the people at the dinner due to the fact that why were of a wealthier background but not every day Americans. The video of that comment was posted on Youtube and spread to many other video sites. This ultimately hurt his campaign because of that people specifically got to see the video and gave them enough proof. Recently in Chicago there was another viral form of media spread. During the NATO summit there were many people walking through the streets protesting. The protesters used websites to stream them walking the Chicago streets protesting (McCarthy). Although the next was reporting the stories of this protest it was a different take seeing it directly from the people exercising their freedom of speech. We are in an age where all important events are being recorded and someone can look back at them from the perspective of many different people involved.

The internet has given everyday people access to information that would have taken years to collect otherwise. It has educated people all over the world with issues that are domestic and global. People that once thought the only voice they had was in a ballot box now can make a difference though a petition with thousands or other people of making a YouTube video watched by millions. We are in a day in age where a politician can talk almost directly to you without you ever having to leave your house. The consequence of this is that people have lost trust in the information that they are receiving. We are most worried about the numbers that are being thrown at us when what the people are actually saying. The times have changed for how we interact with the media through the internet. The methods have evolved and we have entered a new era of information gathering.

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