

Young adults' online participation behaviors:

An exploratory study of web 2.0 use for political engagement

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ABSTRACT

Recent initiatives by the United States government are seeking to enhance the transparency and openness of its decision finding processes. At the same time, increased use of interactive web and social media technologies as well as the integration with online social networking platforms suggests that citizens have unprecedented access to government representatives. In this paper, we report results from an exploratory usability study involving average young adults in an engagement task. More precisely, we observed college students while they searched for appropriate online contact points with the federal government to communicate concerns related to various problem domains. We report a mixture of quantitative and qualitative results including an analysis of post-study interviews with the participants. Less than 30% of our subjects were able to accomplish the objective of the given task scenarios. We find that a combination of individual and institutional factors limit participants. In addition, we do not observe a significant utilization of cues related to online social networking tools. We attribute this finding to a still limited acceptance of such communication tools for political participation by average young adults.

Keywords

Political participation, college students, online interaction, experiment, impact of social networks

1. INTRODUCTION

The Obama administration unveiled in September 2011 the “We the People” petitioning system allowing citizens to indicate support to “take action on a range of important issues” facing the United States. As a general rule, petitions must currently surpass an initial threshold of 25,000 signatories within 30 days to receive a response from the federal government. The system has been thoroughly discussed in the news media. However, its eventual contribution to meaningful political participation is still uncertain. Initial criticism highlighted technical glitches and a lack of quality concerning the formal responses (e.g., having a boilerplate style or being of limited relevance to the text of the petition).

The “We the People” petitioning system is only the most recent example of an overall agenda to address civic participation and information access. On his first day in office, January 21, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies on Transparency and Open Government [20]. One of the planks of this document is that the new Administration would be “empowering the public—through greater openness and new technologies—to influence the decisions that affect their lives [7].” As a result of this directive, United States government agencies were encouraged to adopt Web 2.0 technologies and to develop a presence on social media websites to further the core principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration.

However, technologists argue that the government is ill-equipped to develop the full potential of this approach for several reasons [13]. First, the multiplicity of incoming message streams (in addition to the constituents’ letters to Congress members) further exacerbates the information overload and exceeds the attention limitations of staffers. This is partly because the current implementations of social media platforms are not necessarily developed with the government’s needs in mind [13]. Second, a software solution customized for the purposes of congress (that could potentially tackle information overload issues) has to overcome countless regulatory hurdles and needs to address the realities of deeply entrenched legacy systems [23].

Our goal is to contribute to the understanding of the progress of these government initiatives. In particular, we are interested in the constituent perspective of participation and collaboration with the government. As a result, we believe that a descriptive analysis of the websites of government agencies as well as their utilization of social networking sites could only partially account for the complex interaction processes that lead to effective absorption of citizens’ concerns. Similarly, our work differs from content analysis studies of social media websites (e.g., [32]). Rather, we adopt an exploratory study approach to follow users through the process of identifying the appropriate communication channels with government agencies when they have specific scenario-based needs [24].

More specifically, we provide study participants with different scenarios that encourage them to identify the most suitable government agency and to locate a means to contact this party via the Web. Our analysis is focused on several objectives:

First, we want to ascertain study participants' difficulties to accomplish the task goal. For this purpose we analyze the users' search behavior and formulation of mental models of search as evidenced by their query terms.

Second, we will determine the relative prominence and importance of Web 2.0 artifacts and social networking sites during the search and participation process.

Third, we comment on the participants' perception of the online participation process. For this purpose, we debrief participants after the experimental episode.

Academic studies predicted that commonplace access to the Internet would likely contribute to the inclusion of new types of individuals in the political participation process [16]. Young adults are one of these constituencies who are traditionally underrepresented in the American electorate and other political activities. In contrast to offline political involvement where young adults (ages 18-24) are the demographic least likely to participate, when it comes to online political activity, the participatory deficit of young adults is less pronounced [29]. Recent events have shown that the youth can be mobilized with grassroots campaigns and the use of new communication paths to participate in elections. See, for example, the 2006 election cycle and the use of mobile phone text messaging [10].

We expect that the relative technology savviness of young adults also makes them particularly accessible to novel government participation tools and sites, and believe that they, therefore, represent a key population for our study goals. Further, our investigation helps to evaluate whether the new efforts by the government likely contribute *only* to the dissemination of its policy messages, rather than a meaningful bidirectional exchange of ideas between citizen and their directly elected representatives.

In the next section, we discuss related work in the areas of digital government research and social media use regarding political participation. Afterwards, we describe in detail the study setup and the recruitment particularities before presenting and discussing the study results. We complete the paper with a discussion and concluding remarks.

2. RELATED WORK

More and more we are seeing technology-mediated participation by non-professionals such as citizen journalism, citizen science, and citizen duration. This same type of involvement also has the ability to dramatically alter the operation of government [5]. Political advocates and organizers are beginning to use online application to gather support, raise money, and mobilize constituents. And we are also seeing governments

themselves utilizing online tools to both disseminate information and provide a sounding board for citizen communication [22]. Conversely, over the past years, the Internet has provided an extremely powerful tool, specifically social media applications, for citizens to group together and topple dictator-controlled governments. Although a growing number of studies look at e-government initiatives and the use of social media to mobilize citizens and garner support for a cause, few address how citizens, specifically youth, use the Internet to search and communicate directly with their respective governments.

There is a growing body of e-government research being conducted around the world, and it covers a broad range of areas. Firstly, the terms in this area must be defined and accepted globally. Through early research “e-government” has been defined as indicating uses of information and communication technologies to provide citizens with information about public services, and “e-democracy” meaning greater electronic community access to political processes and policy choices [8]. By studying the usage of city websites that incorporate civic engagement it has been demonstrated that citizens will use these features, however, the level of involvement appears to depend upon their existing political behavior tendencies [14]. Also, the involvement of elected officials with their constituents appears to substantially impact the usage of various stakeholders with their local government’s website and in turn influence policy making participation [12]. A more pressing question that arises from these studies is whether these features that are added to existing government websites are truly creating a two-way channel of communication between citizens and government, or is really just a tool to promote governmental agendas?

2.1 Social media

Until recently, it had been thought that social networks had very little impact on individual’s inclination to participate in politics. However, research in this area has shown that there is a proclivity for those that have engaged with others in a political nature to become more politically inclined and extend their knowledge past their “personal resource constraints” [18]. A study run by the McArthur Foundation supported these findings by documenting that youth who are engaged with the Internet exhibit tendencies of political involvement and show an increase in exposure to political ideas divergent from their own [11]. Proponents of this argument support the further development of social media as a means for political organization and activism.

As witnessed with the Arab revolutions earlier this year, the reach of social networks as mechanism of political engagement has gone international. Diverse research projects in Australia, Turkey, Italy and Norway are showing the same results as in the U.S.—that there is a correlation between the use of the Internet by governments, especially social media applications, leading to an increase of political participation by their citizens, especially notable by the youth [17][28][27].

However, there are some strong findings that show that not only do online groups have very little effect on generating political participation from their members, but that it could possibly contribute to a decline in

participation. The reasoning for this appears to be that the breadth of online discourse is much narrower than offline, as well as it is less personally rewarding [26]. And even with this strong evidence and reference to the phenomenon of “slacktivism”—the low-risk, low-cost form of political participation by using social media websites—it is believed that it is the design and implementation of these current websites and tools that contribute to this malaise. If more informed thought gleaned from the current research of online political involvement were applied, then the rewards for e-government and e-democracy could increase substantially [3][25].

Another factor of the design of online political involvement is reviewing the basic satisfaction of the users. Researches are finding that individuals are not restricted to one sole mode of communication and they must also factor in the communication habits of other modes such as telephone, letter, writing, personal visits, web visit, and email, to achieve a full view. What has been found is that there is a dual problem for advocates of the Internet who have raised the expectation of casual Internet users: i) individuals are dissatisfied with the non-interactive one-way communication channel of submitting correspondence via the Internet, and ii) citizen are disenchanted when they do not receive any sort of confirming or high-quality response [9]. Though these are important factors, they can perhaps be remedied with careful improvements of the status quo of the design for political participation frameworks.

2.2 Digital divide

Not only are proposals being put forth to change the design of online websites to increase political participation, but there are also problems with the physical framework of the Internet. To have some form of Internet access is typically achievable for citizen. However, the current way to measure the digital divide is to consider whether individuals have access to broadband Internet. Not only is the availability of broadband an issue, but so is the cost. Current research shows that income and education is directly correlated with having access to broadband Internet. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies 2010 Report indicates that low-income high school dropouts were three times less likely to have a residential broadband connection than more affluent and educated individuals; an effect observable across White, Black and Hispanic populations [30]. Tied with the concept of digital divide is the “democratic divide.” This is the divide of political participation among those with Internet access. As noted in the previous section there are several problematic aspects within the framework of online participation, for example, how to raise awareness about which opportunities for political participation exist. Altogether, one can construct a matrix of demographic and socioeconomic factors and how they relate to various types of online political activity to document the impediments to overcome the democratic divide [19].

2.3 Search skills

One of the more important skills of using the Internet is the ability to search. Unless a link or document is given to you directly, the only way to find what you are looking for is to engage in the process of search. And it is this skill that most relates to the research experiment which will be discussed further in this paper. Perhaps one of

the best ways to understand search skills is within a profession that relies on the ability to search—librarians. Librarians realized early on that one of the keys of adapting to the computer age and the age of digital search was to develop computer literacy [2]. Another context from which we might be able to draw conclusions about search and political participation is information gathering about health information. By doing a two part analysis with health experts and young, heavy users of the Internet it was deduced that just being a frequent internet user is not a strong predictor for the ability to possess search skills that could be used in other contexts [15]. To put it differently, if young people are not knowledgeable in a certain topic, e.g., healthcare, they are going to be better served if they were trained in some manner about healthcare before they undertake their search process.

2.4 Our conclusions

Overall, the key finding from our review of related Internet search literature is that young people are very poor at demonstrating search skills—and more so, fail to use it in sophisticated ways—when searching for government-related information. This seems quite an important finding in light of a very large narrative that young people are adept with digital technology and tools

3. STUDY DESIGN

3.1 Objective

As stated in the introduction, we were concerned with three areas through our study and subsequent observations that focus on e-government effectiveness. Considering this study was exploratory in nature we were conscious to not force these early stages with hypotheses, but decided to guide our research through a number of research questions. Our hope is that through the study we will better know this topic and then can form more constructive hypotheses. Therefore, our analysis is focused on three objectives:

First, we want to ascertain study participants' difficulties to accomplish the task goal. For this purpose we analyze the users' search behavior and formulation of mental models of search as evidenced by their query terms.

Second, we will determine the relative prominence and importance of Web 2.0 artifacts and social networking sites during the search and participation process.

Third, we comment on the participants' perception of the online participation process. For this purpose, we debrief participants after the experimental episode.

3.2 Design

We developed four user interaction scenarios geared towards top federal policy issues that we thought would resonate with younger voters. Though the participants did not need to be fully knowledgeable about these scenarios, we expected at least some tangential knowledge due to recent press coverage. We were also conscious

that each scenario aligned with a specific major government agency, so that we could gauge the success of the search results [24]. The following are the four scenarios that we developed:

Scenario 1, the diabetes scenario: *“Recently, the media has reported a number of diabetes prescription drug recalls. Since you are a diabetes patient, you are concerned about the recall issue and would like to let the government know that there should be more strict regulations for prescription drugs.”*

Scenario 2, the airport scenario: *“As a sales person, you travel across the country by air at least six times a month. You more and more feel that air travel nowadays has become such a pain because of the delay caused by the overcrowded runways. You would like to tell the government that more runways should be built at major airports of the U.S. to avoid further delays.”*

Scenario 3, the environmental scenario: *“You are an active member of Save The World, a non-profit organization that monitors big corporations' green gas emission. Your organization has recently issued a report about how severe the environmental problems caused by those corporations are. You would like your voice to be heard by the government.”*

Scenario 4, the health care scenario: *“President Obama has been trying hard to get the health care bill he proposed passed in the congress. As a parent with a child who suffers from a chronic disease, you believe this health care reform will bring big impact to your life. You want the president to hear your opinion regarding his health care bill.”*

Our belief was that the aforementioned questions would align with the following federal governmental agencies: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the White House (WH), respectively.

Participants were asked to identify an appropriate submission location on the Internet to deliver a personal comment to the government. Subjects were *not* explicitly given the names or acronyms of the target agencies responsible for handling the issues in each of the four scenarios. We provided all subjects with an identical experimental starting environment on the same personal computer, i.e., a blank Firefox browser page without additional search bar features. Each subject was sequentially participating in two scenarios. Therefore, our quasi-experimental setup is a combination of within (i.e., two scenarios per person) and between (i.e., four different scenarios in total) subject factors. We conducted counterbalanced trials with the order systematically varied where every possible permutation of the experimental design was tested equally often.

We recorded the entire sessions of participants' interaction behavior, and conducted a brief post-experimental debriefing section with each subject.

3.3 Subject demographics

Participants were recruited from the general student population present in a popular student lounge at a US-based, Tier 1 public research university. Involvement in the study was voluntary and unpaid, and required agreement to a notice and consent form. In the present study, 12 undergraduate students participated. No students that we approached refused participation in the study or had to be removed from the subject pool (e.g., for lack of basic online literacy). Of the 12 participants, 9 were female and 3 were male with an age range between 19 and 25.

The limited number of participants allows for an initial appreciation of the search and interaction challenges for this particular task, and for necessary insights for a substantially larger and more focused study that is currently in progress. Our statistical analysis and findings need to be understood within the context of the limited population size for this preliminary study.

4. RESULTS

In the following, we present results derived from the experimental portion of our study. At first, we provide a more formal description of the individuals' search process and include flow diagrams of a successful and failed search (Figure 1 and Figure 3, respectively) to provide the reader with the opportunity to get familiarized with the diversity of search patterns. Then, we delve into a more qualitative analysis of the interaction patterns.

4.1 Numerical observations about search behavior

We are considering a number of interaction variables that were observable in our recordings ($R=24$); with two sequential recordings for each of our subjects ($N=12$).

As basic variables we recorded the time spent during the search as well as the number of interaction steps. We counted as interaction steps each entry/modification of search terms or web addresses, as well as navigation moves that lead to a new website, external program (e.g., email) or document, but excluded scrolling, or other mouse movements.

Irrespective of success, participants completed each individual search task on average in 208 sec. (std. = 135 sec.) with about 13.75 interaction steps (std. = 9.4). The relatively high standard deviation is indicative of significant heterogeneity in the subject pool and/or difficulty of the different scenarios.

In fact, we find that the WH scenario (which involved the submission of comments about healthcare reform) required the shortest amount of search time (105 sec., $p<0.015$) and the fewest interaction steps (7 steps, $p=0.02$ for two-sided t-test between WH scenario compared to aggregated other observations). That is, the scenario with

the most prominent government entity (i.e., the White House) and most pressing policy issue (i.e., healthcare reform) yielded, on the first glance, the most efficient search sessions.

On average, participants undertook 5.8 interaction steps on search engine websites and 4.9 steps on federal government websites (t-test, $p = 0.15$) with the remainder being spent on non-profit, commercial, regional government websites etc.

Further, search patterns became slightly faster (difference=64 sec., $p=0.1$) and shorter (difference 4.3 steps, $p=0.1$) in the second session controlled for each individual. During their second search, participants utilized search engines fewer times (difference=1.5, $p<0.08$), but still spent about the same number of interaction steps on government sites (difference=0, $p=0.5$).

4.2 Search success and its determinants

Subjects were encouraged to decide themselves when they thought to have reached a suitable end point of their search and web navigation. In our analysis, a search was considered a *failure* if it concluded on a non-government website, non-government social networking page, at a government agency that was not federal or at a federal government agency unrelated to the task. Across all scenarios, the results were varied and can hardly be evaluated as overwhelmingly successful. We also did not identify a significant difference between the first and second session for each subject when comparing success rates.

Handling the above criteria leniently 50% of our subjects in each scenario managed to complete the search task in a satisfactory fashion. However, when evaluating more strictly, participants managed to navigate to the FDA (scenario 1) in only three sessions, only one individual navigated to the FAA (scenario 2), and one subject identified an EPA website (scenario 3). Finally, in scenario 4 one subject navigated to the White House website, and one individual ended the search at the respective Facebook site (see Figure 1). However, in four sessions subjects never managed to navigate to a government website at all during their entire search (12.5%).

From our analysis, we identified multiple factors impeding search success of which we present a sub-selection. Those causes are partly within the control of the individual (Factors 1 and 2), and otherwise more of a black-box structural nature (Factors 3 and 4).

4.2.1 *Factor 1 Lack of knowledge of government structure:*

In our debriefing, we learned that most participants did not know the departments they needed to reach at the beginning of the search. This knowledge, however, clearly matters during the search. For example, subject 3 rapidly concluded the search process (in 13 sec. and 3 interaction steps) with the query ‘epa contact form’ (scenario 3). See also Figure 1 for another positive example.

Nevertheless, we were surprised by some of the more egregious failures. For example, in scenario 2 one student concluded the search at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) website (see Figure 2), while

another participant wanted to deliver his over-the-counter drug complaint (scenario 3) to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Similarly, one participant planned to disseminate his message to change.gov, the Obama administration's transition website, even though the transition period between the old and new U.S. government has now clearly ended (scenario 4).

The students' lack of knowledge about the government, its structure, and policies resulted in low self-confidence among participants, which might have affected their search capabilities, and ultimately task success. One subject reported, "The government is unjust, but because I do not know the policies I have no right to complain" another participant explained that she struggled with the task because she "did not know the main government page," as if she was expecting one entity or an individual's website to encompass all activities undertaken by the U.S. government. At this point it is unclear whether the lack of knowledge should be attributed to political or Internet illiteracy. One subject admitted, "I don't feel like I would find a place online – I don't think it will be there... what about if I find a phone number instead? I never wrote to the government!" This hesitation or disbelief that even such a government portal exists reflects young adults' detachment from current political communication strategies and surely has an effect on search success.

4.2.2 Factor 2 Imprecise and/or static mental models for search:

We observed that some individuals only varied their search terms slightly over time. See, for example, the overly generic search queries for the FAA scenario by subject 2 in the first session (Figure 3): 'opinion to US government, questions to US government, how to get intouch with the government (sic.), and complaints to government'. The lack of impactful changes to the search queries is particularly problematic if the initial query yields little promising leads for further browsing behavior and creates negative path-dependence.

Similarly, we registered that search queries did not always change meaningfully with the scenario. For example, subject 12 used in the first scenario (WH) the query 'ways to submit Government opinions' and in the next session (EPA) the query 'contact government.'

4.2.3 Factor 3 Search engine bias:

Though all 24 search attempts begin with a blank browser, without any search engine company identification and the search history cleared from the cache, all 12 of the participants began their process with a Google web search. Additionally, all participants displayed a pattern of going back to the original Google search, or by beginning a new Google search. This reliance on Google and their search algorithm as participants' predominate searching tool skews a bias to the information that is "discovered" by web searches. Though there is debate if Google makes us dumber or not, the reliance on search only for information query will create a concordant knowledge base that could threaten democratic practices [1][31].

4.2.4 *Factor 4 Prominence of Government sites in search results:*

Good queries led usually to rapid search progress, but not always to task success. For example, subject 4 in the FDA scenario searched for ‘government regulations for prescription drugs comments’ and eventually settled for a consulting firm with an economics focus.

One issue is the overwhelming reliance on search engine quality. Several subjects chose the very first search result irrespective of an obvious lack of relevance for the search task. Additionally, it is extremely difficult for new pages to move up to the coveted top two or three pages due to the popularity that is already garnered for the current top pages [6]. This concerning flaw of search ranking makes it a laborious task for new information to be recognized by web searches.

Moreover, due to the severe competition for search result placement with non-government organizations, for-profit companies, individual politicians, news organizations etc. the federal government sites frequently do not achieve top placement given the queries our subjects used. It appears obvious that the government is somewhat at a disadvantage in this competitive process due to more rigid rules in website promotion (e.g., we assume that the government is not proactively participating in search result manipulation, but is rather the target or victim).

4.3 QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM POST-STUDY INTERVIEWS

While most of the participants lacked any previous personal experiences with attempts to engage in informational exchanges with the government, many subjects held beliefs that such communication would be difficult. One subject whose family had contacted military agencies, expressed her frustration with the system: “It’s always a battle with the government, there is so much red tape,” she went on to say that communication with those that actually have the ability to enforce change can only be managed if a personal relationship already exists: “the government will only care about issues if you know the people personally. Unless you have an “*in*” your opinions don’t make a difference, they just *pretend* to care (emphasis added).”

Feelings and beliefs that the government is not actually concerned with any individual’s opinions were shared among many participants. Although one subject praised the ability of social media to reduce some the bureaucratic processes involved in communicating with the government, she still expressed a lack of authenticity regarding what is done with the information once it is conveyed: “I suppose this [social media] makes it easier if you wanted to write a letter. I did not know it existed. I guess this may make people feel better, make them *think* they have a voice (emphasis added).” Subject (#) reported the same feelings: “it’s (i.e., the website) not legitimate, but makes you feel better.”

One participant acknowledged that the sheer volume of online communications must inhibit the ability for any two-way communication to take place, “If I found it this easily, how many other “normal” people know about this, how many entries does the government receive – and from these entries how many are even considered let alone read and responded to?” Another subject even questioned whether a human would process the information,

“From my knowledge I feel it’s not realistic to think that your comment will be read. If someone would even read it, it would most likely be an intern – no...no... a computer!”

The lack of confidence participants share regarding the intentions the government has for communicating with its citizens is concerning. It would appear, at least for our participants, that using the Internet decreases the credibility regarding the impact of communications. Participants seemed to think that any online government communication portal was less valued than other media. In fact, they believed that such means of interaction are void of any authentic desire to communicate with citizens.

Some subjects argued that this perceived lack of sincerity was reflected even in the design of government websites. “The site looked bland like ‘we have to be here’, as opposed to ‘we want to’,” on participant reported. Another subject shared ideas she thought might improve the feel of government sites. She commented that “the content should include statements like ‘*we want to hear your opinions*’ and ‘*your voice is important to us*’.”

4.4 IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

A noticeable impact of social media on the behavior of our participants was limited to two significant events. One subject selected a social media site to submit a message (see Figure 1). This individual followed the link ‘Join us live at www.facebook.com/whitehouse...’ while browsing at healthreform.gov. Another participant (subject 8, EPA scenario) selected the Facebook page of USA.gov from derived search results and navigated from there via ‘contact us’ to USA.gov to leave a commentary.

These limited interactions stand in contrast to a fairly consistent exposure to social media indicators on websites that participants navigated to. Consider that in 11 out of 24 sessions social media cues were present on the last page that subjects navigated to, but not used by most of these subjects.

For example, the last navigation step in Figure 3 includes a “The TSA Blog | Blog Now” button towards the top of the page. Participants 6 and 7 were presented with a “Stay Connected” box with the names and icons for Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, MySpace, YouTube, Vimeo, iTunes, LinkedIn at WhiteHouse.gov (see Figure 4). Other participants browsed to non-governmental organizations’ websites with links to their respective social network presence but did not follow up on those opportunities. Such an example is given in Figure 5.

When asked about the relevance of social network cues to political participation we received nuanced results in the debriefing interviews. Most participants did not make the connection between government, political participation and social media. However, we also received responses encouraging its use, for example, stating that “social media is the way of the future—I’m learning about it in class.” Subject 8 added that “Facebook is a lot more useful, I never would have guessed to access the government through Facebook.”

Another somewhat differentiating opinion suggested that “the younger generations will definitely be using [social media], but it’s not there yet. If I wanted to voice my opinions, I’d call, or email first – actually, I would join a group.” This opinion was echoed by several subjects who emphasized the importance of social connections

– however, in the offline world. E.g., one participant very firmly stated that “formal letters get no response, you need to KNOW someone (*emphasis added*).”

4.5 DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

In our interviews, we noticed frustration related to political participation. For example, one subject interjected that “the government will only care about issues if you know the people personally. Unless you have an ‘in’ your opinions don’t make a difference, [the politicians] just pretend to care.” Participants mentioned “red tape” and other interaction hurdles.

However, government agencies are bound by suffocating restrictions themselves [16]. Therefore, we were surprised to find so many referrals to social network links mediated by agencies’ and politicians’ websites. Nonetheless, we found that those opportunities were rarely utilized by our study participants.

For the young adults in our study the dispersion of government activities across many websites posed a significant challenge. Several participants expressed sentiments similar to one individual who thought our task was “difficult because [he/she did] not know the main government page.” Many sources indicate that young people today are not as knowledgeable and involved in politics as their parents were, and that this phenomenon is less related to their age and more so attributed to a social change in attitudes toward politics [4].

We are currently extending our pilot study on the relevance of online social networks for political participation to study the framing effects of different propaganda message delivery conduits, i.e., through social networks versus traditional communication channels. In this larger study, the scenario provided is better targeted to our university student demographic.

Through our work, we hope to deepen the understanding of the relevance of social media for the engagement of underserved groups, and interactions that reach beyond the traditional comfort zone of many social network users.

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7. FIGURES

Figure 1. An ideal search pattern? - Subject 9, second session, scenario 4 (health care).

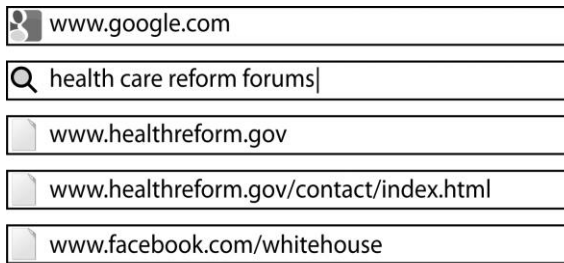


Figure 2 Successful searches for the four scenarios.

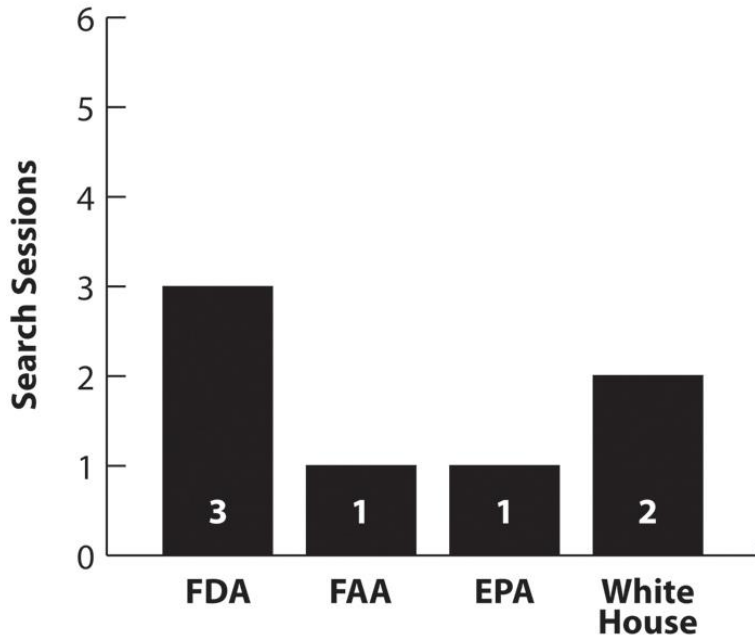


Figure 3 A failed search! - Subject 2, first session, scenario 2 (airport).

- www.google.com
- opinions to US government|
- www.usgovinfo.about.com/blpoll.htm
- <BACK
- www.supremecourt.gov
- <BACK
- questions to US government|
- www.usa.gov/Contact/Faq.shtml
- <BACK
- www.usa.gov/Contact.shtml
- www.usa.gov/Topics/Multimedia.shtml
- <BACK
- www.usa.gov/Topics/Multimedia.shtml
- www.usa.gov/Topics/Reference_Shelf/Dialog.shtml
- www.datagov.ideascale.com
- www.google.com
- how to get intouch with the government|
- www.state.nj.us
- <BACK
- usa.gov|
- www.usa.gov
- <BACK
- complaints to government|
- www.govspot.com/complaint
- www.tsa.gov/contact/index.shtm
- www.contact.tsa.dhs.gov/DynaForm.aspx?FormID=60

Figure 4 Passing over social media during a successful search - Subject 7, first session, scenario 2 (airport): Stay Connected social networking features (on right side of page) on Whitehouse.gov

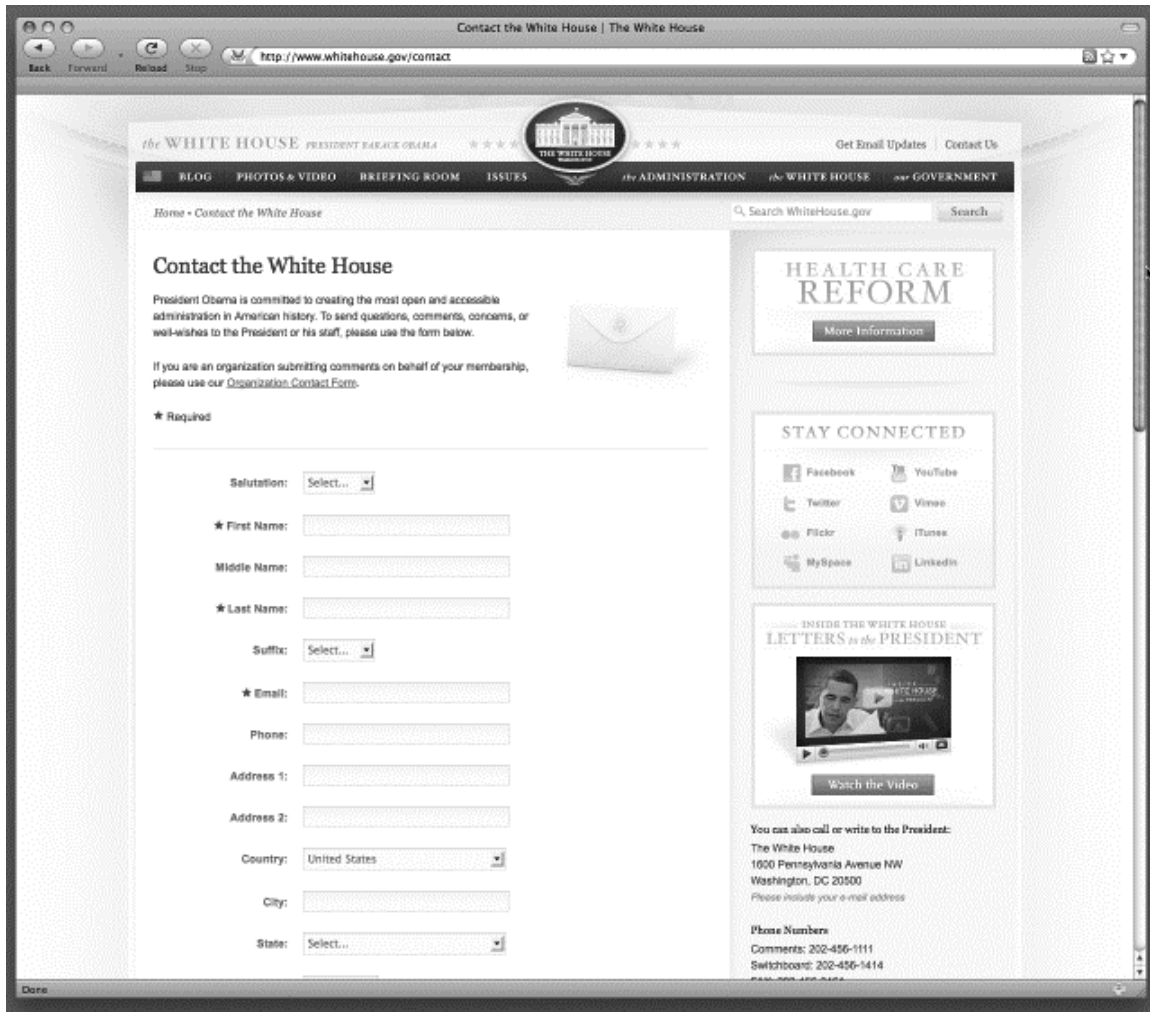


Figure 5 Passing over social media during a failed search - Subject 7, second session, scenario 2 (environmental): Social networking features on Earthjustice.org (see, for example, top-middle and right-middle of the page)

