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e-Politics 2004: How Online Campaign Coverage Has Changed in Four Years

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e-Politics 2004: How Online Campaign Coverage Has Changed in Four Years

At a time when the Internet has become the primary source of election news for a growing number of Americans, political news web sites have clearly evolved but have also taken some steps backward, according to a new study of coverage of the presidential primary season online.

Sites have come a long way in offering users a chance to compare candidates on the issues—something almost entirely absent in 2000. They are also no longer merely morgues for old newspaper stories and provide more chance for users to manipulate and customize information.

Yet the major Internet news sites make less use of interactivity, contain less original reporting, have fewer links to external sites, and offer fewer chances to see and hear directly from the candidates on their election front pages than they did four years ago, according to the study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, which did a similar study in 2000.

Sites varied widely in style and content, and the organization was often confusing. Sometimes the richest sites were the hardest to navigate.

Still, the continuing reliance on traditional wire service and newspaper stories for content means that, contrary to fears about the web as a source of unsubstantiated rumor and innuendo, the content here is carefully sourced and documented.

In the end, there is a long way to go before the major news sites fulfill the promise of a truly new medium—offering interactivity, citizen involvement, and direct access to diverse sources of information.

Various measures suggest the Internet is becoming a more important part of how people get political news. A January 2004 survey of Americans about political news by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that, "The Internet, a relatively minor source for campaign news in 2000, is now on par with such traditional outlets as public television broadcasts, Sunday morning news programs and the weekly news magazines." The survey found 13% of Americans reported getting "most of their news about presidential campaign" from the Internet. In September 2003, according to Media Metrix, a record 150 million Americans went online, and somewhere between half and two-third's of those who go online get news there.¹

Four years ago the Project conducted the first study of election news online. It found heavy use of wire copy and a fair number of links to outside sources, but it was difficult to get a comprehensive sense of the candidates from any site.

Now that the Internet has become an important election tool for campaigns, and a major source of information for many news consumers, how have things changed?

To answer that, the Project built on its earlier study of online election coverage. Eight of the twelve websites from 2000 still exist. The Project re-examined those sites, plus two others that are now among the most popular in the country. These ten include a mix of online only sites, old media newspaper sites, those from television and two

¹ "Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, January 11, 2003; "comScore Media Metrix Announced Top U.S. Internet Property Rankings for September 2003," comScore press release, October 21, 2003.

journals of opinion. The sites were downloaded twice each day, following the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. In all, the study examined 60 political front pages on 6 days and 138 lead stories on 7 selected dates.

The goal was to get an early look at what major web sites were offering citizens who were looking for election news and to evaluate how that had evolved from four years ago.

Among the findings:

- Users were even less likely to find original reporting online this year than in 2000. More than a third of front-page stories online (37%) were wire copy from secondary sources, up from 25% in 2000. Much of that so-called original content, moreover, involved modifying wire copy rather than being original bylined stories.
- Roughly half of all sites at every download contained more than 20 stories—and some, such as MSNBC and the Washington Post, contained almost double that many.
- As was true four years ago, going into and out of primary contests at least, users would be hard pressed to find a lead story that dealt with anything other than the latest back and forth among candidates, or the horse race.
- Seven of the ten sites offered background links to candidates' policy positions. Four years ago, only half the sites studied contained such links.
- Interactivity is still not a big component of online political front pages. Four of the 10 sites studied offered no interactivity at all, and those that did offered less of it than four years ago.
- The number of links to external web sites also has diminished. Seven of the ten sites studied offered no links to other sites or to other news organizations.
- Sites are turning more this year to “customizable” information, allowing users to manipulate data by matching themselves to a candidate or searching information about a particular state.

The sites studied included the political front pages and lead stories of the eight most popular web sites that carry news, according to data from Nielsen//NetRatings: ABC, AOL, CNN, MSNBC, New York Times, USA Today, Washington Post, and Yahoo. Six of these were sites studied four years ago. Two (USA Today and ABC) were new to the list of the top eight sites.

In addition, the study included two prominent political web sites not among the top eight in traffic, but which we studied four years ago and are considered major sites in the online world of opinion journalism--National Review Online and Salon.²

In 2000, most sites had one political page. This year, several of the sites have both a politics page and an election or campaign page. For this study, we examined the campaign or election page if a site contained one, since this was usually the page dedicated to the election and most likely to offer voters the full range of links and

² Four years ago, there were two separate lists in the ratings of web sites, one for portals and another for news sites. Today, Nielsen has only a single list for web rankings, and several of the portals are gone. Those include Pathfinder/Time Inc., Go Network (owned by Disney and which got news from ABC), Microsoft's MSN portal and Netscape (of the AOL Network).

materials on understanding the candidates. The politics page was more likely to cover breaking news and political events beyond the campaign.

Mirroring the earlier study in 2000, the 2004 study examined seven days in the heat of the primary season. It studied five days following the Iowa caucuses (January 20 to 24), and the two days following New Hampshire (January 28 and 29). There were two elements studied on each web site, the political or election front pages and the lead story on the page.

Components of the Study

The election or political front page

The political or election front pages were examined once a day, at 9 a.m., for six of the seven days in the study (Saturday, January 24 was omitted). Several different elements were measured. First, we counted the total number of **election-related stories**. Next we counted how many of those had **original reporting**.

Next we considered some Internet-specific elements of the pages. We tallied the amount and type of **other web sites** a user could click to, such as FEC.gov. Next we counted the number of targeted **links to specific pages**—rather than home pages—such as a page detailing a candidate’s voting record or biographical information. Finally we looked for links to **unfiltered audio or video**—that is speech directly from the candidates or other news sources. This would include an “In Their Own Words” segment from a Howard Dean speech, for instance but not a correspondent’s audio or visual package about that speech.

The lead story

In addition to the political front pages, we studied the lead story on each page twice a day. We broke each story down four ways. First we identified what **triggered** each story. A candidate? The press? Something else? Then we noted what each story was about, or its **topic**. Third, we considered how each story was put together or **framed** (was this story about the latest John Kerry appearance, for instance, canted to be about his chances for winning, how he had changed tactics, or his policy ideas?). The study calculated the number of **sources** for each story and classified the first source cited.

Finally, has this **lead story changed** since the previous download of this site?

Front Pages

What was there

The political front pages on the Internet varied widely in how many stories they offered, a sign that, unlike newspapers, there is no consensus about the look on the web, or how many stories users can absorb on a page.

Sites varied from as many as an average of 37 stories (Washington Post) to 11 (CNN).

Roughly half the sites (47%) carried between 11 and 20 stories at any given time. Another quarter of the sites (27%) featured between 21 and 30 stories. And fully 20% of sites featured more than 30 stories.

The only consensus seemed to be that there should be a lot of stories. Only 7% of sites ever featured fewer than 10 pieces on its political page. The bulk of that was represented by CNN, which carried 10 or fewer stories a third of the time.

The Washington Post carried the most stories of any site. All of the Post front pages we looked at contained more than 30 story links. Among the other newspaper sites, the New York Times political front page never had fewer than 21 story links, while USA Today most often contained fewer than 20 story links and never had more than 30.

<u># of Stories</u>	Percent
10 stories of fewer	7%
11-20 stories	47
21-30 stories	27
31 stories or more	20
Total	<hr/> 100%

*For all charts, total may not equal 100 due to rounding.

The opinion sites, National Review and Salon, both featured fewer stories. National Review averaged 14 story links. Salon averaged 17. Neither ever had more than 19.

<u>Site</u>	Average
ABC News	20
AOL	19
CNN	11
MSNBC	35
National Review	14
New York Times	29
Salon	17
USA Today	20
Washington Post	37
Yahoo! News	29
<i>All front Pages</i>	23

The TV sites demonstrated no particular pattern. Again, CNN stood out for the limited number of stories and perhaps a less chaotic look (averaging 11 story links and never more than 12). MSNBC, on the other hand, averaged 35 story links, and always had at least 21. ABC fell somewhere in between, ranging from 11-30 stories in the pages we viewed, with an average of 20.

The web-only portals were consistent from day to day. AOL averaged 19 story links, Yahoo 29.

Overall, this is more story links per page than we tended to see four years ago. The Washington Post, for instance, averaged nearly double the number of story links it had in the 2000 primary season.

Next in line was MSNBC, which was also at the top four years ago, though with 20 or more stories then, compared with tending towards 30 or more this year.

In 2000, two thirds of the pages featured 16 election related stories. This year, 93% of the pages examined contained at least 11 stories.

Original Reporting

When you consider the number of stories that were original reporting, versus wire copy or modified wire copy, the depth of the political pages might be slightly less impressive.

Overall, 63% of the stories on these 10 web sites studied were staff written, or carried staff credit lines.

But even here there seem to be two levels of originality—those sites with original bylined stories and those with staff credit lines in which it is difficult to tell how much the story is wire versus original work.

Four of the sites studied here led the way in originality: CNN, National Review, New York Times and Washington Post (all 89% or more original copy).

Yet many of the CNN stories carried no byline, just a CNN credit line, and it was not clear how much involved simply modifying wire copy.

MSNBC followed a similar form. There 78% of the stories bore staff credit lines, but most did not carry named bylines and were usually wire copy that had been modified, sometimes in limited ways.

USA Today stood out from its newspaper siblings for its lack of original reporting. While 95% of the stories on the New York Times site were original (most of them from the newspaper) as were 89% at the Washington Post (including more original web copy), just 47% of USA Today stories were original copy. The majority were wire stories.

Meanwhile, AOL and Yahoo remained entirely reliant on second-hand sources. Yahoo had one story that was original, AOL none.

<i>Site</i>	Percent
ABC News	56%
AOL	0
CNN	96
MSNBC	78
National Review	93
New York Times	95
Salon	79
USA Today	47
Washington Post	89
Yahoo! News	1
<i>All front Pages</i>	63

Interactivity

One of the findings four years ago was that surprisingly few of the top news web sites seemed to take advantage of the potential of the web to allow citizens to “take part” in the news through interactivity.

At that time, three sites contained no links at all. Three more featured just one or two interactive links.

Four more contained moderate levels of interactivity, between three to seven links on their political front pages.

And two of the 12 sites studied four years ago featured a great deal of interactivity with eight or more interactive links.

Four years later, the level of interactivity is even more modest than four years ago.

This year, four of the 10 sites studied offered no interactive opportunities on their front pages, National Review, USA Today, CNN Vote 2000, and Yahoo.

Three others--ABC, the New York Times, and MSNBC--consistently offered only a single interactive opportunity.

AOL, the Washington Post and Salon offered the most interactive opportunities of any sites studied. AOL was at the top, with two or three interactive links, depending on the day.

No sites studied this year offered anywhere near as many interactive opportunities as we found in 2000.

<i>Site</i>	Yes	No	How Many?
ABC News	✓		1
AOL	✓		2-3
CNN		✓	
MSNBC	✓		1
National Review		✓	
New York Times	✓		1
Salon	✓		0-2
USA Today		✓	
Washington Post	✓		1-3
Yahoo! News		✓	

What many sites are opting for instead is the ability to customize static information, or search it the way a user wants. On several sites, for instance, users can click on a map of the United States to check details of a particular state's primary or select candidates to compare on a particular issue.

This makes users less passive in their use of the web, but it stops short of being interactive in the sense of allowing the user to ask questions of reporters, send e-mail comments, vote or opine on an issue or otherwise actively participate.

This level of activity might be called proactive news consumption, or even play, and it may be a growing trend in web sites. It also requires less maintenance by web masters. What we may be seeing, however, is a stepping back from the kind of interactivity pursued four years ago.

Unfiltered Audio and Visual

Another powerful potential of the Internet is the multi-media dimension, or the combination of audio, video and text.

Here we found two distinct kinds of multi-media.

The first is web sites posting video stories they or their partners had produced.

The second is giving users access to direct video and audio of the candidates and other newsmakers, such as the chance for people to see or hear the candidates on the stump or in a debate.

We found the use of both kinds of multi-media media to be quite limited. The web remains at least in 2004 heavily a text-oriented medium, even at television-based sites.

Six of the 10 sites contained produced packages with audio-visual content.

If anything, there was even less chance for users to hear directly from candidates and other newsmakers than in 2000.

As in 2000, we found great variety between the sites when it came to this kind of unfiltered multi-media access.

Four years ago the split was mainly between sites that offered no such opportunities and sites that used this potential extensively. In 2000, four sites offered no access to direct audio and video of newsmakers (Netscape, MSNBC, AOL and the National Review). Four others tended to have seven or more such links (the Washington Post, ABC/Go, Salon, the New York Times).

This year, five sites offered no such audio and visual links. Among those that did, the overall use of the technology was more limited than in 2000.

The Washington Post kept its standing from four years ago by offering the most, though this year it was between two and five links rather than more than seven.

By contrast, the other two newspaper sites, USA Today and the New York Times, never offered more than one such link during any of the downloads.

Policy Background Links On Election Front Pages			
<i>Site</i>	Yes	No	How Many?
ABC News	✓		1
AOL	✓		1
CNN	✓		2
MSNBC		✓	
National Review		✓	
New York Times	✓		10
Salon		✓	
USA Today	✓		10
Washington Post	✓		1-2
Yahoo! News	✓		1

Many sites opted instead to run text transcripts of the candidates in their own words. All sites except AOL, Salon and USA Today offered text-based transcripts.

Page Links

Another way the Internet can help citizens is by offering specific kinds of background information about candidates or the election process. The study looked for three types of information—policy positions, candidate biographies and information about the primary process. The information could be compiled by that web site or by another source.

This feature allows users to go beyond whatever framework the reporters might be focused on at a given moment. The lead stories on a site might all be about polls or horse race. If voters are just tuning in for the first time and needed a primer on where the candidates stand on issues, or who they are in the first place, such links offer them a way to find that out easily. This is a big advantage over traditional media, where audiences have to take what is being offered that day.

Four years ago, the Project found only limited use of this potential. Less than half the sites regularly offered even one link to where the candidates stood on issues. Biographical information was slightly more common. The only thing that was easy to come by was basic information about the electoral process.

Things have improved some in 2004.

Seven of the ten sites studied contained links on their front pages for users to readily learn about candidates’ policy positions—and several included handy ways to compare the candidates to each other.

In some instances, this was one link that opened up to an array of choices among eight candidates. Others had a separate link to each candidate. A number of sites included the President among those whose policy positions could be compared.

Seven of the ten sites also contained biographical background information on each of the candidates. The quality of these different links varied noticeably. Some, like the New York Times, included at-a-glance sketches plus links to the paper’s longer profiles.

Others, such as Yahoo and the Washington Post, had video profiles, though in both cases these were produced by the Associated Press.

As was true four years ago, the kind of background easiest to come by was basic information about the primary process--the campaign calendar, basic information on voting or in some cases, such as USA Today, the ability to download a voter registration application. Nevertheless, there were still three sites that had no such information.

The total number of links to background information on each site, however, in many cases was smaller than four years ago. ABC, Washington Post and New York Times all offered fewer such links than in 2000, at least from their main page.

<u>Site</u>	Yes	No	How Many?
ABC News		✓	
AOL	✓		1
CNN	✓		9-11
MSNBC	✓		2
National Review		✓	
New York Times	✓		11
Salon		✓	
USA Today	✓		1-8
Washington Post	✓		11
Yahoo! News	✓		12

The two sites that offered the least when it came to background may not be that surprising. Salon and National Review Online offered nothing in this regard.

The third site offering little, however, was MSNBC. The only kind of background information it offered from its political front page was biographical, and this was a link to archived Washington Post content called “The Contenders,” where one could find some

links to past stories, a photo gallery, old interactive chats the candidates had done and an excerpt of a stump speech.

This is a striking change from 2000.

Four years ago, for instance, MSNBC was among the leaders in offering background information on the electoral system, with at least seven links on its front page each day.

This year it offered a single link on one day.

Voter Information Links On Election Front Pages			
<i>Site</i>	Yes	No	How Many?
ABC News	✓		3-4
AOL	✓		2
CNN	✓		5-7
MSNBC	✓		0-1
National Review		✓	
New York Times	✓		2-5
Salon		✓	
USA Today	✓		5-8
Washington Post	✓		1-4
Yahoo! News	✓		2-4

External Web Sites

In addition to incorporating tailored background information, web sites also can serve citizens by offering links to external

sites. In this sense, news sites function as portals themselves, helping citizens find other sources of information.

The study examined two ways that sites can do that, by linking to other news organizations’ sites and to external non-news web sites, such as the Federal Election Commission for campaign contribution data, Congressional Quarterly for candidate voting records, and more.

To measure the extent to which each site took advantage of this potential, we counted the number of links on the political front page to other sites.

Non-news external sites: As we found four years ago, this was more limited than some might expect. Indeed, it was more limited than in 2000.

Seven of the ten sites studied had no links to external non-news sites. The only three sites that did contain such links were Yahoo, MSNBC and the New York Times. It may surprise people indeed that it was the Times that made the highest use of this, with five such links on its political front page. This marks a marked shift for the Times from what we found during the primary season in 2000. Then the Times offered no links to external non-news sites.

The other two sites with external links were more limited. Yahoo contained two such links, MSNBC one.

Four years ago, such activity was more common. MSN and Time Inc.’s Pathfinder each had more than seven such links. Yahoo, the Washington Post, Salon and National Review had at least one such link. One reason for the change may be the demise of several interesting voter sites this year such as Voter.com, a site that independently had aggregated useful information about candidates and the process.

External news sites: The other way in which news sites can function as more general portals is by becoming a gateway to other news organizations. To measure this we counted how many links there were to news organizations that were not owned by the same parent company. We did count as an external news link any site that was in some kind of formal partnership or joint venture with the host site, such as MSNBC.com is with Newsweek or the Washington Post. These links are to the sites generally (usually the home page), rather than to a specific story or content element. (Yahoo, for instance, contained links to biographical information from another source.)

Again, we found less depth than many might have expected. Six of the ten sites examined contained no links to other news organization, including some that four years ago were more collaborative. ABC, CNN, National Review, Salon, USA Today, and the Washington Post and Yahoo all had no links.

On the other hand, the New York Times, a newspaper historically chastised for behaving as nothing mattered until it had appeared in the Times, contained four links to outside news organizations (and in recent days has added to that), leading the way. The others with external news links were MSNBC (to Newsweek and the Washington Post, with whom it has joint ventures), and AOL.

This represents a decrease in connectivity for web sites.

In 2000, just three of 12 sites studied offered no links to outside sites. This year, six sites offered no such links (ABC, MSNBC, National Review, Salon, USA Today, and the Washington Post).

Four years ago, similarly, four sites offered four or more links to outside news sites. In 2004, only the New York Times offered that many.

Lead Stories

Topic

The study was designed, during the last election, to look at political news web sites during the heat of the primary contests. Thus it may come as no surprise that when looking at lead stories, the focus was on things like horse race, endorsements, staffing and tactical maneuvers, not on policy, record or biography.

In all, 80% of stories were largely political in topic rather than revealing of the candidates character, record or positions. Four years ago, during a roughly similar period, the study found a slightly higher percentage of political topics in lead stories (85%).

In contrast, only 2% of lead stories

Topics of Lead Election Stories	
<i>Topic</i>	%
All Politics	80
<i>Candidate Performance</i>	
<i>Assessed</i>	16
<i>Fundraising</i>	4
<i>Primary Results</i>	14
<i>Political Calendar</i>	1
<i>Staffing & Management</i>	5
<i>Tactical Maneuvering</i>	7
<i>Battle Ahead</i>	19
<i>Other</i>	15
All Personal	2
All Policy	4
Other Campaign Topics	11
Non-Campaign Topics	2
Total	100

(just 3 out of the 138 studied) were largely about what the candidates were like as people (their record, personality, management style, biography).

And only 4% of stories were about their positions on issues, their proposals or where they were promising to take the country.

If these matters are to be found on the Internet, it is not what these campaign sites are leading with. In reading these stories, the emphasis on such inside matters was relentless, filling paragraph after paragraph of copy.

Indeed, many of the stories have a kind of partial or rushed quality, something slightly less substantial than the morning newspaper or an evening news package. It is more of a mid-day update of the moment.

The most popular single topic of lead stories—political or otherwise--was looking forward to the battle ahead (19% of stories compared with 28% in 2000), examining how this or that might affect a given candidates chances in the coming contests. The next most popular topic was assessing candidate performance on the stump (16% of stories), though this number was influenced by attention to Howard Dean’s post Iowa concession speech, dubbed, among other things, the “I Have A Scream” speech.

Four years ago, tactical maneuvering was a much larger topic (21% of stories). This year it made up 7% of the stories examined.

Frame

Beyond the nominal topic of lead stories, the study also examined how those topics were treated—or framed. A story about someone’s policies could be framed in how that might make them vulnerable to attack. A story about tactical maneuvering or campaign staff might focus on what it says about a candidate’s leadership ability or judgment.

To a degree even greater than four years ago, lead stories on the Internet tended to be framed as straight news accounts—the use of the inverted pyramid (who, what, when, where, how and why). This is a typical way to build a story when a reporter doesn’t have any particular theme or point they are trying to pursue, but rather are trying to give an account of the latest events.

Many stories fell into this category because they contained a little bit of everything rather than trying to capture in any particularly coherent way the day’s events. The style of MSNBC helps illustrate this. The site tends to simply add to a wire story account as the day goes on, getting longer and longer over time.

Fully 46% of lead stories studied were framed as straight news accounts (the exact same percentage as four years earlier).

When reporters did build a story around a theme, the most popular one was the campaign as horse race (19%) followed by a focus on the tactics and strategies of the campaigns (11%). Candidates’ leadership ability came next (9%), and discussion of their

<i>Frame</i>	% of all stories
Policy	0%
Candidate’s Behavior	7
Candidate’s Leadership Ability	9
Tactics & Strategies	11
Horse Race	19
Other political Internals	5
The Political System	4
Straight News Account	46
Other	1
Total	100

behavior without any direct discussion of what it might imply about their leadership or judgment made up 7% of stories.

Sourcing

Contrary to the idea that the Internet is a bastion of opinionated argument and unsubstantiated innuendo, the sourcing on these sites was strong—even stronger than we found four years earlier. More than a third of the lead stories (38%) cited seven or more sources. That is almost twice as many as we found in 2000 (21% had such sourcing).

<i>Number of Sources</i>	<i>% of all stories</i>
0	6%
1	7
2	8
3	9
4	10
5	15
6	8
7	12
8 or more	26

What’s more, more than half of all lead stories (61%) cited at least five sources (compared with 54% in 2000).

Only 6% of stories cited no sources at all, and that was consistent across the sites studied.

Anonymous sourcing was also minimal. Only 4% of the lead stories studied led with an anonymous source.

As was true in 2000, the most common first source was a candidate. Nearly six-in-ten stories (59%) offered

Total	100
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one of the candidates as the first source (up from about half in 2000).

The next most common first source cited in lead stories was a poll (12%), something that might depress some voters, like those who made headlines for booing ABC anchorman Ted Koppel for asking about polls in a debate in New Hampshire this campaign season.

Trigger

What triggered the lead stories online? Here we found substantial differences from our study four years earlier.

In the 2000 campaign, decisions by journalists, rather than external events, were a major force in initiating lead stories. A news organization might decide to do a profile or to examine an ad strategy. Journalists triggered 41% of stories, even more than candidates’ speeches (39%).

This year, journalist-driven stories made up half that number (21% of lead stories). A great many more of the lead stories were initiated by things the candidates themselves said or did (41% of stories),

and by election results (26%). Four years ago, only 8% of the stories were triggered by election results.

The differences between the campaign may be a function of the fact that there are so many candidates this year, or that the Iowa and even New Hampshire results caught many journalists off guard.

Updating

How often are lead stories updated or changed on the web? Four years ago the study downloaded the web four times a day and found significant updating throughout the day. This year we examined each web site twice a day. This makes comparisons with four years ago impossible.

Not surprisingly, we found that most 5 p.m. downloads featured a different lead story than at 9 a.m.—though perhaps to a lesser degree than one might expect. The majority, 54% of the stories were completely new. Another 4% were updates of what had led the site eight hours earlier.

The sites that tended to keep the same lead story all day were ABC, New York Times, Salon, and the National Review Online.

Four years ago, in four downloads a day, we found 45% of stories were completely new, 10% were updated and another 45% were the same story repeated.

e-Politics 2004: Site Profiles

As is the case with much of the web, numbers only tell part of the story of online political offerings during the 2004 political season. A page's personality and depth—what you get from all those links and stories—can't be captured in a strictly quantitative analysis. So as it did in 2000, the Project asked journalist and PEJ Senior Associate Dante Chinni to profile each of the sites the study examined. He spent some time poking around at the pages, clicking through them and reading their content. Herewith are his personal thumbnail impressions of the 10 political-election sites studied.

ABC News, Politics page

There is no separate “election” page per se on the ABC News website. Instead, the web gurus have decided that the best approach is a slightly expanded version of the regular political page, www.abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/. As a result they have created a good page for journalists and other insiders who know how many delegates are at stake in Guam (it's five) and are looking for some analysis and levity with their news.

ABC's approach presents some shortcomings for those looking for comprehensive information. There is no special link to a calendar of upcoming primaries. The only “issue” coverage here comes from the candidates' “own words,” which is nice for the sake of accuracy, but alone it may not be very helpful for voters. Without a real journalistic examination of what's being proposed, all the approaches sound good. For

instance, Wesley Clark's plan for creating jobs will "save \$2.35 trillion over 10 years to invest in priorities and cut the deficit, creating the conditions for long-term growth and prosperity." Not bad. But Dennis Kucinich will "put Americans back to work" and "increase the quality of life in America, by making highways safer, water cleaner, and schools more conducive to learning." Decisions. Decisions. The bio pages are also not particularly extensive and they are tucked away pretty well. There are some links to candidate ads and some links to speeches. There's basically some of a lot of things, but it feels hit or miss.

In 2004, ABC appears to have made the decision that data aren't going to be their bag. Instead, the page seems more interested in providing a more relaxed approach to the campaign, focusing on a breezy style and what at least seems to be "inside" information. There are not a lot of links here and the ones that are here aren't updated a lot throughout the day. While there are links to ABC video and audio (which you have to pay for, thank you very much) some wire copy and some interesting longer pieces from correspondents traveling with the candidates, these are not the pages' defining characteristics. The franchise and driving personality of the page is "The Note," the granddaddy of the daily political insider memos that have become so popular (CNN and MSNBC also have their own versions of this).

The Note is clever, irreverent and smart. On Tuesday, the day of the New Hampshire Primary, its news summary contained the following: "If you want to play a good drinking game, gin-up every time Freddie 'The Beadle' Barnes or Mort Kondracke on Fox say something like, 'if he doesn't finish above 20 percent, it's over for him ...' or 'he needs a third place finish to have any chance.' We're astounded that even the astute Beltway Boys would utter such elitist, voter-disdaining comments. But of course, it's not just a Fox game: every time, for example, Wolf Blitzer asks a candidate's offspring, 'What will your father have to do tomorrow in order to stay in the race?' drink up. In fact, if you are in the political press, we have some special suggestions for you — and for us: Try not to talk about the New Hampshire results in terms of whether candidates meet or didn't meet the media's expectations."

Even the political calendar on the page, which appears at the end of the Note, takes on this tone.

- Feb. 4, 2004: Washington Press Club Foundation's congressional dinner, D.C.
- Feb. 6, 2004: Fmr. President Ronald Reagan (R-Calif.)'s birthday
- Feb. 7, 2004: Michigan Democratic caucuses
- Feb. 7, 2004: Washington Democratic caucuses
- Feb. 8, 2004: Maine Democratic caucuses
- Feb. 8, 2004: 46th Annual Grammy Awards, Los Angeles
- Feb. 8, 2004: NHL All-Star Game, St. Paul, Minn.

As journalist "insider" pages go, this one is a very good read. It's interesting and fun, and who wouldn't want to know when the NHL All-Star Game is? But if you're looking for facts and figures, there are better places to shop.

AOL, Elections 2004

Ah, remember the promises of the Time Warner-AOL merger. Back in the good old days an age of wonderfully blended and merged content was just around the corner. The new multi-media behemoth would combine the reach and new-media savvy of AOL and the content of Time Warner to create the ultimate web experience. Well, something happened on the way to tomorrow, and judging from AOL's Elections 2004 page, www.electionguide04.com/index.adp, the sunnier future is on hold.

Since the 2000 campaign the Elections page has improved its look. And in terms of sheer volume – there are usually at least 15 story links on this front page – there's a reasonable amount of content here. But those links are either to other big news outlets – the top political stories from the New York Times, USA Today and Time are all here in boxes on the bottom of the front page – or the wires. One might expect to find rich content from other parts of the Time Warner empire here, or better yet original content specifically for the site. But there isn't any, save the links to Time. If not content, how about technical expertise exploiting the web's capabilities? Nope.

Even some of the wire copy that appears here – and there is a lot of it – is a bit stale. On the top of the page, the stories concerning the presidential race are fresh and updated regularly throughout the day. But beneath that, in a section called "Race for Congress," the pieces aren't just days old, they are weeks old. On Thursday, January 29, the top story here is "Katherine Harris to Announce Senate Bid" from January 15. And just beneath it is a piece from January 7, "Gary Hart Said to Be Mulling Senate Bid." It also turns out that Dewey didn't really defeat Truman. And the bio pages here are done baseball card style, with only bare essentials appearing in a small box.

Elections 2004 offers some interesting items. Its "President Match Quiz," in which users fill out a questionnaire on issues to find their political soul-mate, is fun, but mostly good for a laugh. The questions here are so simple they ignore any nuance in position. And the site's "Political Spectrum" gives users a chance to hear or read conservative or liberal columnists and their thoughts on politics. Some of the options are interesting. On February 3, for example, one could listen to former Clinton Press Secretary Mike McCurry's thoughts on Trippi leaving the Dean campaign. But the way the choices are presented, liberal voices on the left side of the little "Political Spectrum" box and conservatives on the right, does play into the "choose your side" aspect to politics. Are there columnists who inhabit the middle? And one has to wonder about some of the voices represented here. Do we really need to hear more from Ann Coulter?

There are some other nice features here as well. The "Voter Services" area of the site lists state-by-state primary and caucus dates, explains how each state's system works, gives pool open and closing times and in some cases even allows users to get started on registering to vote. The "Glossary" section explains the meaning of various bits of campaign jargon for the uninitiated. And the page's "The Sideshow" link takes users to some of the best political humor on the web, including clips from the Daily Show and articles from "The Onion."

But in terms of overall content, Elections 2004 is not among the top tier of the sites we looked at. It's not even the best Time Warner election site we site examined. CNN's is better.

CNN, America Votes 2004

CNN's "America Votes 2004" website may be the best kept secret in political coverage, but only because CNN makes it that way. There is no direct way to reach the site from CNN's homepage. The only ways to get there without typing in the address directly are by clicking an election story and then clicking the "America Votes" banner over it, or by going to CNN's "Politics" page and clicking the "America Votes" link which sits on the bottom third of the page. But if one seeks it out they will find an impressive site in terms of layout, data and usability at www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/.

Like other sites, CNN breaks up its political coverage. Those seeking breaking news, opinion and a truckload of story links will find it at the site's "Inside Politics" page, which is easy to access off its front page. There is also video on the "IP" site ... if you're willing to pay.

American Votes, however, has a different mission. That is apparent first from the fact that it contained on average the fewest stories of any site we looked at, just 11. Compare that to the 37 on the Washington Post site. There is a small space at the top right, "Campaign Buzz," devoted to the latest stories from the campaign trail, written by CNN staff. And under that sits the "Morning Grind," CNN's daily campaign memo, a news-analysis piece from CNN's political unit that is well-written, mercifully short (some the campaign memos on the web would take a day to read through fully) and has a clever tone. The January 26th piece, "We're Number Three" was an example of the interesting mix of news, insider chatter, and speculation that normally appears here. "For a colorful metaphor explaining Clark's slide in the polls," the Grind reported, "we'll quote CNN's own Dan Lothian, who has covered Clark for several weeks and now, after talking to voters, compares him, respectfully, to a spare tire: 'Clark's like a spare tire that Democrats kept in the trunk in case they got a flat [in Iowa]. They didn't get a flat, so they're probably going to leave Clark in the trunk.'" Respectfully speaking, of course.

The real strength here, however, is the raw information available. The page features snapshots of all the major Democratic candidates, each with links that delve into that candidates bio and positions as well as his financial information – how much each has raised, spent, has on hand and has in debt. The "Morning Grind" section lists the candidates' schedules for the day. Also prominently displayed is a "Primary Explainer" that gives information on how each state's primary or caucus works, a "Calendar" that lists the dates of upcoming votes and an interesting feature called "Timeline" that looks back at significant political dates and stories from this election cycle. And on the page's bottom right there is section called "Campus Vibe" that is devoted to dispatches from college journalists around the country.

Not that there aren't flat spots. On February 2, the latest polling data here was from January 22. While no one is advocating too much focus on the horse race news of the day, reporting on last month's track results isn't particularly helpful either. And there isn't a lot of cutting edge content here. There are no links to video or campaign commercials or transcripts. Still, this is a solid entry. It may not be edgiest sight in campaign land or the most advanced, but it is a useful workhorse.

MSNBC, Politics

If one were to write a book about MSNBC.com's Political page, where its campaign coverage resides, it might be called "The Site that Loved Content Too Much." It isn't really the front page itself that is overwhelming, though there is a lot of information at www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032553/. The problem lies more in the features themselves. They are LONG and sometimes in need of editorial shaping.

The main story on the page continues the MSNBC tradition of growing as the day goes on, adding in bits of reporting here and there, until after a half a day it almost needs to be measured by the yard. This presents opportunities and challenges. It allows for regular updating and gives the page the ability to weave the breaking stories of the day into a longer narrative that hits on one or two themes. Sometimes though, that theme-making can be a stretch. On the morning of February 2, for example, the headline on the lead MSNBC story was "Edwards, Clark see gains in new poll," but some of the pieces internal subheads were "Kerry Ripped Over Special Interests" and "Medicare & President Bush." In addition, if you click by MSNBC more than once during the day and notice the story was just updated, you have to scan through a bunch of stuff you've already read to get the new nuggets.

MSNBC's morning political memo "First Read" is also long – the Tuesday of the New Hampshire Primary it was a full nine pages of cut and paste. But length isn't the real problem. There is not a lot of over-arching thought or analysis holding it together. And there is little of the pithy punch of ABC's The Note. It is more a list of links to the political stories of the day attached to brief synopses – a service that many sites offer now – with nothing making it special.

The rest of the story content on MSNBC's Politics page is done cafeteria style. It is a mix of a lot of wire copy along with some original reporting and features from the Washington Post, Newsweek, even Slate – if you're wondering, yes, they are all in some way affiliated with MSNBC. But the net effect is really just a laundry list of story links all done in the same point size and font and put together in no sensible fashion. Some fall under "More From Decision 2004" and some are under "More Politics Coverage" though it's not really clear what the difference is between the two headings. A section devoted to pieces by MSNBC National Affairs Writer Tom Curry Reports gives the site something it desperately needs, analysis. But it's not enough.

There are some helpful links on other pages. There is a kind of Nomination Process for Dummies animated presentation that walks users through the entire process from Iowa to the convention, including discussions of strategy and Super Delegates. And an interactive map that shows when caucuses and primaries are held and how many delegates are at stake – though it didn't always function properly for us. Links to the Washington Post and Open Secrets.com provide data on individual candidates and their finances, respectively. But in all the aggregating one can't help but wonder where the NBC news-gathering muscle has gone. What happened to providing original content? There is some here from the "campaign embeds" (perhaps one of the most unfortunate phrasings in the history of journalism) but their access doesn't yield inside dope as much as arm chair analysis. Take this bit from John Kerry's embed on Saturday January 31: "In

addition to the get out the vote effort, Senator Kerry's veterans events reinforce his connection to the military." It takes an embedded reporter to get scoops like that.

This page's bigger problem is its focus on the horserace of the campaign. This focus is apparent from the way it plays polls (the top right of the page on February 2), its emphasis on its own poll (the highly controversial Zogby poll at that), its lack of issue reporting (which it leaves to the Washington Post) and its other claim to fame (or infamy, depending on how you see it), the "Demo Derby." The concept behind the Derby is simple. If you are tired of reading all the stories, polls and tea leaves, the editors of MSNBC have made it easy to figure who's doing well and who isn't by putting oversized heads on little bodies riding red white and blue donkeys. You can figure out who's in front by looking at ... who's in front. The idea is to cut through all the headlines and get straight to the horserace aspect of the season. Some may like the feature's graphic simplicity, but others may want to bash their computer screens with the jawbone of an ass.

The site's strengths and weaknesses might be epitomized in one fact: it is was the only general news site studied that did not offer a single link from its front political page that would tell users where the a candidate stood on the issues.

The National Review Online

Four years ago we reported that NRO was "not your father's National Review." Since then little has changed, and that is probably just fine. Like Salon, it too seems to have grown up a bit. There are no references to "bitch-slapping" this time around from the nation's favorite conservative gangstas – and considering the changes at Salon one wonders if this is about the medium maturing. Still, for sheer entertainment value, National Review Online is, as it was then, a good read. Even if you're not a conservative you have to admire the breezy, informed tone of its writing.

Warning: Do not come to this site for data. If you do you'll be disappointed. In fact, this site may be less interactive than four years ago. The reader forums that were here in 2000 seem gone. There are no candidate profiles or calendars. There are no interactive maps or slick video or audio, no candidate-by-candidate issue analyses. What you will find here, on the front page and everywhere else, is copy, lots and lots of copy, plus, of course, the chance to buy books from Anne Coulter and Sean Hannity and Ronald Reagan t-shirts. But most of the writing here is well-done and refreshed regularly. The day after New Hampshire, editor Rich Lowry gave his assessment of Howard Dean candidacy. "Despite the recent *NR* cover urging the nomination of Howard Dean, I always thought it was wrong for conservatives to root for Dean. His nomination in itself would shift American politics to the left and, once nominated, there would always be some outside chance that he could win. But now that his chances of winning the nomination have sunk toward the vanishing point, it has become safe to root for Dean. Get me an orange ski cap and a weblog. I want to be an honorary Deaniac."

The site does at times let its ideological preferences get in the way to the point where it seems it is huffing and puffing – that metaphysical certitude that often creeps into writing from true believers on the political right and the left. "It occurred to me while

watching Howard Dean's victory (?) speech in New Hampshire that the Democrats are running a campaign to return America to the 1960s," wrote contributor Michael Graham the day after New Hampshire. Maybe. Or maybe, seeing as they are Democrats who are unhappy with the president, they are simply doing what all candidates do in primary campaigns, energizing their base. Overall though, the tone of the stuff here is intelligent and entertaining.

To their credit, the editors of National Review Online do an excellent job of keeping their site fresh. This is obviously easier for NRO than a reporting-based site – coming up with opinions at an opinion magazine may not be the hardest thing in the world. But the editors deserve some credit for the sheer workload they take on. In the space of one week, Lowry wrote four pieces that appeared on the site. White House correspondent Byron York wrote three over the same period. One can only hope they have insurance to cover the carpal-tunnel problems they are bound to have by November.

For all that output, however, NRO's greatest fault may be its lack of reporting. Even for the reddest red-state voter, it seems destined to be a secondary site for news. While many praise the Internet's ability give people access to unfiltered information, this site is pure filter. It is all, to use a nasty word, spin. And while spin can be fun, without context it is dizzying.

New York Times, Campaign 2004

The New York Times has seen the future of political coverage on the web and it is broadband. Ironically it is the Times, the old-guard keeper of journalistic tradition, that seems most interested in delving into the high-bandwidth multi-media possibilities of the web on its Campaign 2004 website, www.nytimes.com/pages/politics/campaign/index.html. But recent additions have improved this site and despite some gimmickry, the Times still hasn't abandoned people looking for good old-fashioned data.

Campaign 2004 loves reporter-narrated picture slide shows, a lot. And whether you like this approach or not may well depend on if you are logging onto the site through a dialup connection or a cable/dsl line. Then again, it may depend on how much you want to see a picture of the actress Glenn Close kneeling at an Edwards rally, while correspondent Todd Purdum tells you that ... Glenn Close was kneeling at an Edwards rally-- as the site did in its "Closing Moments" slideshow on Monday, January 26. It's certainly nifty, but one has to wonder if there isn't a better way to use all those resources.

That's not all that's here, of course. The lead story is usually the paper's lead political story, and you can get the entire day's campaign coverage from the paper. Stories are updated throughout the day as news breaks. And there is some nice bonus coverage here. The site recently introduced "Times on the Trail," a "continuously updated report" from the campaign with entries labeled with the hour and minute they were uploaded– though sometimes reports come in a flurry with nothing following for quite some time. And yes, even the venerable Times now has a Hotline-esque listing of links to important political stories of the day by other news organizations down the right-

hand column of the “Trail” page plus links to other good political sites and press releases and schedules. These new additions to the site are an upgrade.

The Times also has an arrangement that allows it to present links to columns and pieces from each week’s Congressional Quarterly, though those pieces obviously get dated pretty quickly. On the right side of the page there is a “Campaign Calendar” that shows the most recent primaries and links to the full list of upcoming votes. And there are candidate pages that feature their positions, the Times newspaper profile pieces of them as well as links to all of the paper’s coverage of them. Be advised, however, any stories older than two-weeks require the reader to pay. Just above those candidate links there are interactive profiles that feature – surprise – two-to-three-minute photo slide-shows with correspondent voiceovers as well as candidate timelines that give a more graphic approach to summarizing a candidate’s accomplishments.

There is, without question, some cool stuff here and the site is well-designed and easy to get around. There is something nice about hearing the extreme Reader’s Digest bio of a candidate read by the reporter that is spending some time with him, and the stream of pictures does make it all the more powerful. But there are other places where this site seems to be missing opportunities. For instance, debate transcripts might be nice. And considering all the interest in broadband here maybe there should be a way to view ads, as there is on the Washington Post site. Convergence may be the next big thing for the Internet and the news media in general, but it may not be all its cracked up to be if it comes at the expense of the Internet’s greatest strength, depth and availability of information. This site’s strength is some innovative features and easy navigability. But, until the recent addition of more outside material, the Times site, ironically, lacked some of the depth one might have expected. The fact that it is improving as the election season goes on is a positive sign. There may be more to come.

Salon.com

Between the 2000 campaign and this one Salon has gone through some changes. It is now a pay site, with much of the content only available to subscribers. Its staff and budgets have been cut and, as always seems the case in the world of the web, some of its better-known reporters have moved on. All told, Salon.com and its political page, www.salon.com/news/index.html, is a leaner animal than it was in 2000. Its staff, which numbered 175 at the start of last election cycle, is down to the mid double-digits today. And its feature stories that once used to occupy its highlighted middle column for sometimes hours in 2000 now sit there for days. This site is more like a conventional magazine in 2004 than it was in 2000.

In some ways it is also a more grown up. Some of the attitude that used to appear on these web pages has gone, along with Jake Tapper, now with ABC, who could always be counted on for adding a little fun into his insights. And there are a lot more straight, reported pieces – emphasis on that last point. This is not really an online opinion journal. By and large this site still believes in reporting, which makes it stand out among the non-newspaper sites we studied – most others rely wholly on wire or opinion pieces. On Thursday, the 29th, the lead on Salon was a well-done, straightforward account of Joe

Trippi quitting Howard Dean's campaign as news broke that the campaign had burned through its record contributions a little too quickly. "Joe Trippi, the iconic architect of Howard Dean's Internet-driven campaign, is gone," the piece began. "And so are the millions of dollars that Dean raised from legions of grass-roots supporters over the last year." The story was balanced and polished but it was a lot like similar stories that appeared on a host of other sites, which raises a problem with Salon's approach: Why pay to read the story on Salon when you can read the same thing on the New York Times' or Washington Post's site?

There is opinion here as well, but in the political section at least, it was all supplied on the seven days we studied by one person, liberal columnist Joe Conason in his "Journal." Conason's pieces are also intelligent and well-considered. "Having long felt that Kerry possesses qualities and experience that recommend him," Conason wrote on the 29th "-- despite his defects as a retail politician -- I hope he understands the problems and perils he will confront." He goes on to discuss the things Kerry needs to be prepared for and the things he should change in the coming months. Some of Conason's insights are valid, such as the danger Kerry might face if his "electable" tag leads him to retreat into a defensive crouch. Others, however, sound more like wishful thinking. Conason writes that, "Nearly every poll ever taken about George W. Bush shows [voters] know he isn't that leader." Actually, whether Democrats like it or not, poll after poll shows voters find Bush to be a "strong leader," but one can dream.

The site is easy to navigate largely because there aren't a lot of links here. There are no maps or interactive calendars, but, like National Review Online, that's seemingly not why users come here. What they get here is well-written and edited pieces with a liberal slant – but less and less pointedly than four years ago.

It's all very good and responsible. In fact in 2004 Salon feels much less like a website than a magazine and that's good and bad. Much of the not-ready-for-prime-time scratches have been buffed away making for a better-edited product that often reads better and seems more professional than it did in 2000. But one can't help but miss the old Salon as well – the one that pushed boundaries and looked like it was sometimes produced on the fly. It feels like that one friend you have who once played a little too close to the edge and has reigned himself in and now the party just isn't as fun as it used to be.

USA Today, Politics

If you are worried that the press is becoming too opinionated or biased, USA Today's campaign page may be the cure for what ails you.

The page is a lot like the newspaper. It's comprehensive. It's straightforward. And it's not particularly grabbing. That's not to say there's nothing here. Its politics page, www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/front.htm, has all that day's coverage from the paper and stories going back to the previous days. There are also wire stories, not just thrown on the page, but selectively chosen. Overall, the site seems to place a high premium on evenhandedness. Analysis exists here, but it isn't trumpeted. The paper's columnists are played at the bottom of the page.

Don't expect a whole lot of analysis or edge. The overwhelming majority of the stories here are always wire copy and they are straight what-happened-yesterday accounts. By noon the day after the New Hampshire Primary, the two lead stories, "Kerry wins hotly contested N.H. primary" and "Kerry calls N.H. victory 'huge turnaround'" were both from the AP. There was an analysis piece from Jill Lawrence and Susan Page, "Kerry, Dean return to familiar roles," but it was clearly marked as such and is set as the third option for visitors. Despite its heavy dependence on wire copy, however, USA Today doesn't just update for update's sake. Sometimes one wonders if they do it enough. On Monday, February 2, the top story of the day, "Dean Admits Strategic Failures," a roundup of what was said on the Sunday talk shows, stayed the top story through the day and into the night.

Even the "Issues" section of the site is remarkably short of analysis and explanation. Most of the time, positions on issues as complicated as trade, gay rights and education are characterized in statements that are at the most four or five lines long. This, of course, has the advantage of brevity, but nuance is often lost in the process. For instance, on the issue of abortion, the site poses the question, "Do you support abortion rights?" And Wesley Clark's position boils down to one word, "Yes." Wow, can I quote you on that? It's not exactly an exhaustive examination of the question.

The site features the usual fare. There are the profiles of the candidates. There is a calendar of upcoming votes. And there is a link to polling data, USA Today's and others. What is surprising here, however, is the limited interactivity and the limited depth of information. Gannett, a powerful media company with its hands in many different forms of communication, does not do much with the web's potential. There is a link to each campaign's financial data, but there are no transcripts here and no ways to watch ads.

All of which makes using the page a bit like driving a Chevy. It gets you from here to there, but you can't help but look at all the Cadillacs go by.

Washington Post, Elections 2004

The Washington Post's election page is a bit like a Jackson Pollack painting. There's a little too much going on, but when you step back and take it all in you can appreciate it if you don't get overwhelmed. This is a very deep page offering basically everything one could hope to expect from a site – audio, video, text, interactive maps, transcripts. If it has a weakness, it's that it is trying to offer much more than a normal newspaper site, while at the same time sticking to the "traditional" newspaper web-design. The effect is a cluttered-looking page where some great content can be missed. On the other hand, it comes as close to any site studied for being a one-stop-shop to learn what you need about the race.

As with many newspaper pages, the main content on "Elections 2004," www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/politics/elections/2004/, is the stories from that day's paper. The links to those pieces occupy the center column and stretch down into the campaign coverage from the past few days. Again, this is the kind of accepted norm for newspaper sites and it gives the Post's franchise, its newspaper content, top billing.

But with a page as deep and rich as “Elections 2004,” that approach means nearly everything else is crammed into right column. And there is a lot of it. On February 2, in a section where you can pick your own video to watch, there was “Video from New Hampshire,” “More on New Hampshire,” “Video from Iowa,” “More on Iowa,” “Debate Transcripts,” “Conversation with Candidates” and “Ad Watch.” Below that, there is a section for dispatches from correspondent Terry Neal, an interactive primary calendar (by date and by state) links to pages on each of the candidates, an interactive map of Senate races and a section for online chats and the latest wire reports. Some of these features are very nice and well-designed, but they have been shoe-horned into such small spaces they are easily lost. One of the site’s best offerings, “Comparing the Candidates” is crammed like an afterthought between two larger features.

“Comparing the Candidates” lets voters click on different names and look at their positions on various issues in two parallel columns. Yes, now shopping for a candidate is as easy as shopping for a dishwasher at Best Buy, which offers a similar feature for appliances. One can, for instance, click on John Kerry and Al Sharpton and compare them on energy policy by finding out where they stand on the same four core issues – ANWR, Alternative Forms/Sources, Mideast Oil and Electricity Infrastructure.

Yet as rich as this page is, it’s not completely clear what the Post thinks of it. There is no way to get to the elections page from the front page of Washington Post.com. And stories that are updated throughout the day on front page and even on the Post’s “Politics” page aren’t always added to “Elections 2004.” In fact, the Politics page has a lot of the same material available on the elections page. Which makes one think that in the end, the page’s design may have more to do with its place on the Washington Post’s site than anything else. The paper seems to see “Elections 2004” as kind of an attic – a place to throw any and all election coverage – while its Politics page is the tidy, well-kept living room. And, appearances aside, there is a lot here worth foraging for. The real concern is will it be so crowded in May we won’t be able to move.

Yahoo, Election 2004

Yahoo’s election site has come a ways since 2000. Then it was a simply a place where wire stories went to die. But in 2004 the site has learned the value of one of the Internet’s most endearing traits, wholesale theft – and we mean that as a compliment. Yahoo’s Election 2004 site, news.yahoo.com/elections/, doesn’t just recycle wire copy anymore, it has become a one-stop shopping spot for campaign coverage featuring news outlets from throughout the country and world. Monday, January 26, for example, along with wire copy that had been updated recently, there were pieces from the New York Times, Washington Post, Time, Boston Herald, LA Times, BBC, Chicago Tribune, Manchester Union-Leader and Business Week – along with audio from NPR. Four years ago, we found that “almost all the news on Yahoo!’s page is provided by Reuters,” along with a little NPR. Not so anymore.

Yahoo is still obsessive about updating. It’s a rare occasion that you go by this site when the newest stories in its “Off the Wires” column are older than 30 minutes. This need to be fresh can still lead to some strange story choices. At one point on January 26,

the top story was “With Arkansas Swing, Bush Targets Democratic Rivals,” a story with some bearing on the presidential race. But minutes later the top story was “The Personal Side: Candidates on Food” which contained such important items as the fact that both Howard Dean and John Kerry like chocolate chip cookies. Wesley Clark doesn’t touch sushi. And Dennis Kucinich has many food no-nos, "I'm a vegan; that covers a lot." Indeed.

Overall, though, Yahoo has done a better job of boxing this fast-changing, often less important aspect of its coverage in one small area. The stories from newspapers are more static and heavier. In fact, to get a quick morning look at what campaign stories major outlets are covering, you could do a lot worse than Yahoo.

Beyond aggregation, however, Yahoo, which was born of the Internet, takes less advantage of pursuing the opportunities the technology offers. There is some video and audio from other places, but little depth to its content. Links to candidate profiles and issue stands are listed so far down the page they are easy to miss. The profiles themselves, which come from a website called Congress.org, are only two or three paragraphs long. And the candidates’ stances on the issues come from the candidates themselves, not a disinterested third party. The 2004 Elections Calendar, while comprehensive, offers little extra info. There are no results for votes that have passed and no explanations of how the different primaries and caucuses work.

Yahoo does, however, offer one special feature on this page, the Yahoo Buzz Index. The Index keeps score of which candidates are being searched the most. Does it actually mean anything? The day before New Hampshire, the Buzz Index showed Howard Dean had climbed from third to first in the previous 24 hours, passing John Kerry and John Edwards. And indeed the next night Dean did see something of a surge, though not nearly enough to catch Kerry. Then again it’s hard to say what those users were searching for on Yahoo. They may just have been looking for the “I Have A Scream” remix.

Methodology

Ten Internet web sites were monitored for 7 days during the start of the primary election season: January 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28 and 29. Each day, the sites were downloaded at 9:00 am and 5:00 pm., which marked the beginning and end of the workday. Each download took between 10 and 15 minutes. The order in which the sites were captured was rotated for each download time.

Eight of the 10 Web sites—ABC, AOL, CNN, MSNBC, New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, and Yahoo! —were the top news eight individual news sites by unique visitors according to Nielsen/NetRatings rankings in November 2003 (the most recent available at the time of the study). The National Review Online and Salon were also included.

Eight of the ten Web sites, all but ABC and USA Today, were included in the 2000 study. Four sites from the 2000 study were dropped due to their discontinuance as news pages: Netscape, Go, Pathfinder, and MSN.

In 2000, the twelve Internet web sites were monitored for six days during the heat of the primary election season before Super Tuesday on March 7. The specific dates were February 23, 24, 27, 28 and March 5 and 6.

Inclusion and Screening

Once the web sites were selected, the election front page was found. If the site did not have a specific home page for its election coverage, the politics home page was used. For Salon, the News and Politics home page was used. For the National Review Online, the front page was used. The Yahoo! election page studied was the political page accessed from its own “News” link. While AOL is a subscriber service, its election coverage was accessed in a non-subscriber mirror Web site.

The URLs for the pages looked at it:

ABC: <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/>

AOL: <http://www.electionguide04.com/>

CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/>

MSNBC: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032553/>

National Review Online: <http://www.nationalreview.com/>

New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/politics/campaign/index.html>

Salon: <http://www.salon.com/news/index.html>

USA Today: <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/front.htm>

Washington Post: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/politics/elections/2004/>

Yahoo: <http://news.yahoo.com/elections>

On Tuesday, January 20, the first download occurred at 1:00 pm instead of 9:00 am. This download did not include ABC News or USA Today.

Coding Process

Researchers worked with a detailed, standardized coding scheme. Front pages for the 9:00 am downloads only were coded for content variables: number of stories, amount of original reporting, number of interactive elements, links to external sites, number of feature stories, etc. On Tuesday, January 20, the 5:00 pm download was used for front page coding. On Saturday, January 24, the front page was not coded, but the lead stories were.

Next, the lead story of each front page was coded. The lead story was selected as the most prominent story on the page. Each story was coded for content: number of sources, general topic, changes in lead story, etc. Then the story was coded for intent variables: story, trigger, and frame.

In all cases, coders worked with a defined set of rules per variable. Of particular note is the 50% rule in effect for story frame. When calculating story frame, coders identified all text that implies which frame the story is told around. If 50% or more of the text is told around that frame, the story is coded as having that frame. If multiple frames are used, but one did not dominate, stories are coded as straight news or no dominant frame.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability measures the extent to which individual coders, operating independently of one another, reach the same coding decisions. Tests were performed throughout the project. No systematic errors were found. In addition, the coding supervisor reviewed decisions on intent variables when necessary and made any changes needed to bring coders to agreement.

ePolitics 2004 Topline

For all tables, totals may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Front Pages

All front pages (n = 60)	ABC (n = 6)	AOL (n = 6)	CNN (n = 6)	MSNBC (n = 6)	Nat'l. Review (n = 6)	N.Y. Times (n = 6)	USA Salon (n = 6)	Wash. Today (n = 6)	Post (n = 6)	Yahoo (n = 6)
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Total Stories: Percent in Each Range

	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
10 stories or fewer	7	0	0	33	0	17	0	17	0	0	0
11-20 stories	47	50	100	67	0	83	0	83	83	0	0
21-30 stories	27	50	0	0	33	0	67	0	17	0	100
31 stories or more	20	0	0	0	67	0	33	0	0	100	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Total Stories: Average Number

	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#	#
Average number of stories	23	20	19	11	35	14	29	17	20	37	29

Original Reporting: Percent in Each Range

10 stories or fewer	38	50	100	33	0	17	0	17	67	0	100
11-20 stories	32	50	0	67	0	83	0	83	33	0	0
21-30 stories	17	0	0	0	83	0	83	0	0	0	0
More than 30 stories	13	0	0	0	17	0	17	0	0	100	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Original Reporting: Percent of All Front Page Stories

Average Percent of Front Page Stories	<u>63</u>	<u>56</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>96</u>	<u>78</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>95</u>	<u>79</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>89</u>	<u>1</u>
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	All front pages (n = 60)	ABC (n = 6)	AOL (n = 6)	CNN (n = 6)	MSNBC (n = 6)	Nat'l. Review (n = 6)	N.Y. Times (n = 6)	Salon (n = 6)	USA Wash. Today (n = 6)	Post (n = 6)	Yahoo (n = 6)
Interactive Links											
Yes/No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
How many (Range)	0-3	1	2-3	0	1	0	1	0-2	0	1-3	0
Policy Background Links											
Yes/No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
How many (Range)	0-10	1	1	2	0	0	10	0	10	1-2	1
Biographical Background Links											
Yes/No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
How many (Range)	0-12	0	1	9-11	2	0	11	0	1-8	11	12
Unfiltered Audio/Video Links											
Yes/No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
How many (Range)	0-5	0-1	0	0	0	0	0-1	0	0-1	2-5	0-2
Voter Background Links											
Yes/No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
How many (Range)	0-8	3-4	2	5-7	0-1	0	2-5	0	5-8	1-4	2-4
External Voter Information Site Links											
Yes/No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
How many (Range)	0-5	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	0	0	2
External News Site Links											
Yes/No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
How many (Range)	0-4	0	2	0	1	0	4	0	0	0	0-2

Lead Story

<i>Story Origination</i>	Total (n = 138)	%
Staff writer or staff	57	
Other News organization	1	
Wire service	27	
Combo write-staff	11	
Other	4	
Total	100	

<i>Lead Story Trigger</i>	Total (n = 138)	%
Election Results	26	
Candidate Driven	41	
Campaign Driven	1	
Observer Driven	4	
Press Driven	21	
Independent Polls	6	
Other	1	
Total	100	

<i>Lead Story Topic</i>	Total (n = 138)	%
All Politics	80	
Advertisements	0	
Candidate Performance Assessed (i.e. connection to voters; on the stump)	16	
Fundraising	4	
Polls	0	
Primary Results	14	
Political Calendar	1	
Staffing & Management	5	
Tactical Maneuvering	7	
Endorsements	0	
Battle Ahead	19	
Other	15	
All Personal	2	
All Policy	4	
Policy (general)	4	
Campaign finance Reform	0	
Defense/Military	0	
Taxes	0	
Health Care	1	
Abortion	0	
Education	0	
Other Specific Policy	0	
All Social Issues	0	
Other Campaign Topics	11	
Non-Campaign Topics	2	
Total	100	

<i>Lead Story Frame</i>	Total (n = 138)	%
Policy Explanation	0	
Candidate's Behavior	7	
Candidate's Leadership Ability	9	
Candidate's Health	0	
Tactics & Strategies	11	
Horse Race	19	
Other political Internals	5	
The Political System	4	
Straight News Account	46	
Other	1	
Total	100	

<i>Lead Story: Number of Sources</i>	Total (n = 138)	%
0 sources	6	
1 source	7	
2	8	
3	9	
4	10	
5	15	
6	8	
7	12	
8 or more	26	
Total	100	

<i>Lead Story: 1st source—named or unnamed</i>	Total (n = 138)	%
Named	91	
Voter	2	
Candidate	59	
Candidate surrogate	9	
Outside expert	6	
Staff journalist	0	
Outside journalist	1	
Poll/document	12	
Other	3	
Unnamed	4	
No sources/Not applicable	6	
Total	100	

<i>Lead Story Length (in paragraphs)</i>	Total (n = 138)	%
1 to 5		4
6 to 10		10
11 to 14		12
16 to 20		17
21 to 25		23
26+		34
Total	100	

<i>Lead Story Change (5 pm stories only)</i>	Total (n = 68)	%
New Story		54
Update		4
Repeat		41
Total	100	