ePolitics:
A Study of the 2000 Presidential Campaign on the Internet

Many of the most popular online portals do not live up to the promise of the Internet as a gateway to new, unfiltered and diverse information about politics, according to the first-ever study of coverage of the presidential election online.

A close look at the most widely accessed Web portals reveals the dirty little secret of much of the Internet: wire copy—usually from Reuters, a conventional 149 year-old British wire service.

At the same time, the notion that the Old Media of television and especially newspapers use the Internet mostly for "shovelware," or as a dumping ground or morgue for yesterday's stories is also largely untrue.

While they run stories from their print or broadcast outlets, the web sites of traditional old media, are much more likely than Internet portals to exploit the Web's unique capabilities.

On the other hand, the worry that the Internet is a vast bastion of unsubstantiated rumor and innuendo is also false, the study found. The information on the Internet about the campaign is remarkably well sourced—and very little is based on anonymous sources.

These are some of the findings of a new study of political coverage on the most popular Internet sites by the Committee of Concerned Journalists. The study was produced for the Committee by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

More and more citizens are turning to the Internet for news about the presidential election, especially as television abdicates covering the story. A survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found nearly a quarter of Americans are now getting at least some of their campaign news through the Internet.[1] Another study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Alliance for Better Campaigns found that the three major network newscasts are now averaging just 36 seconds a night of candidate discourse.[2]

The Internet is also heralded for being a tool for citizen empowerment, for its ability to mix text, audio and video, and for its speed, openness and depth.

But what do citizens find about the election once they move online? How much is the Internet using its capacity? And for all the talk of a diverse landscape of information, how much do sites vary, say from portals like Netscape to online journalism sites like Salon?

To answer these questions, the Committee of Concerned Journalists examined 12 of the most popular web sites that provide news and information, including portals, purely online news sites and sites connected to Old Media news organizations, checking them repeatedly through the day on key dates during the primary season. In all, the study examined 72 political front pages and 286 lead stories on six selected dates from late February to just before Super Tuesday, March 7.

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[1] "The Tough Job of Communicating with Voters," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, February 5, 2000.
[2] "Network Newscasts Offer Fleeting Glimpses of Presidential Candidates," *The Political Standard*, Volume 3, Number 2, March 2000.

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In addition, it studied the front pages of the print editions of the New York Times and the Washington Post for the same time period as a basis of comparison between print and the net.

The goal was to get a first look at what the Internet offers citizens looking for election news.

Among the findings:

- Sites did a fairly good job of updating the news. There was a completely new lead story in almost half of the downloads, 45%, and an updated story another 10% of the time.

- But frequent updates don't necessarily equal better understanding. Sometimes the most important event of the day was missed or too quickly bumped down the page. For example, in the four downloads on February 28, AOL never led with John McCain's speech in Virginia Beach attacking Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, even though it was not only the story of the day but perhaps the critical event of his campaign.

- A full quarter, 25%, of all political front pages contained no original reporting.

- Substance is hard to find on the net, too. Only 2% of the lead stories studied dealt with the candidates' policy positions, records or core beliefs, less than in the newspapers. Half the sites offered some kind of link to this information.

- Sometimes the political pages themselves were hard to find. Netscape, for instance, buries its political news menu within the site. The user must first click on a lead story and then wind his or her way through to the political news page. CNN, in contrast, required only one click on the "Politics" bar in the upper left corner of CNN.com.

- A quarter of all front pages had no interactive element. This 25% came entirely from web-born portals.

- The Washington Post and MSN seem to provide the greatest overall mix of news, links to additional information, interactive elements and audio-visual material.

- Lead stories were well sourced. More than half had at least five sources. Nearly 90% lead with a named source.

The study examined the political front pages and lead stories of 12 of the most popular web sites, according to ratings data supplied by Media Metrix, a leader in Internet and digital media measurement.

The sites studied included portals of the five most popular properties on the web that carry news: *AOL Network's Netscape; AOL Network's AOL News (not the subscriber news page but the portal AOL.com) Yahoo! Sites' Yahoo!, Microsoft's MSN (*which links to Slate's political page*), and Go Network's Go,* which is owned by Disney and gets news supplied by its subsidiary ABC News.

The study then added the three top web news sites that supply election news: *MSNBC* (The NBC News run site), *Pathfinder/Time Inc.* (which is really Time magazine's site), and *CNN.*

The study then selected two prominent Internet magazine sites and two newspaper web sites for inclusion not based on Media Metrix data: These included *Salon, National Review Online, The New York Times on the Web,* and *Washingtonpost.com.*

Studying this new medium requires a new approach and a new methodology—

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│     Media Metrix February 2000 Web Rankings      │
│                                                   │
│  Top Properties (news portals)                    │
│  1. AOL Network (AOL.Com*, Netscape*)             │
│  2. Yahoo! Sites (Yahoo!*)                         │
│  3. Microsoft Sites (MSN.com*)                     │
│  4. Lycos (no news portal)                         │
│  5. Excite@Home (no news portals)                 │
│  6. Go Network (Go.com*)                           │
│                                                   │
│                                                   │
│  Top Web News/Information/Entertainment           │
│  1.AOL News (subscribers only)  9.Weather.com     │
│  2.AOL Entertainment        10.Disney Online      │
│  3.ZDNet                     11.GO2Net.com         │
│  4.About.com                 12.FreeLotto.com      │
│  5.AOL Sports                13.Pathfinder.com*     │
│  6.AOL Computing             14.iVilliage sites    │
│  7.MSNBC.com*                15.CNN.com*            │
│  8.CNET.com                                        │
│  *indicates the site is included in this study.   │
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which over time will undoubtedly be refined. Given the continuous nature of the web, we chose four separate download times to examine, 9 a.m., 12:30 p.m., 4:30 p.m. and 9 p.m., based on the normal news cycles, the posting times for web sites and times that users would naturally access the web.

Components of the Study

The study examined six days in the heat of the primary season. It studied the two days after the Michigan and Arizona primaries, the two days leading into Virginia and Washington and the two days leading into Super Tuesday (February 23, 24, 27, 28 and March 5 & 6). There were two elements studied for each web site, the political front pages and the lead story on the page:

The political front page
The political front pages were examined once a day, at 9 a.m., in several ways. First, we counted the total number of **election related stories.** Next we counted how many of those had **original reporting**. Third, we calculated how many stories were prominent or **featured** and then how many of those featured stories had changed since the last time we saw the page.

Next we considered some Internet-specific elements on the pages. We tallied the amount and type of **other web sites** a user could click to, such as Vote-Smart.org or CNN.com. 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 data. Finally, we looked for links to pages of **unfiltered audio or video**. This would include an unedited speech by Al Gore but not an NBC TV story about the speech.

The lead story

In addition to the political front pages, we studied the lead story on each page four times 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, the **topic**. Third, we considered how each story was put together or **framed**. Finally, the study calculated the level of **sourcing** for each story and classified the type of first source used.

In addition the study noted two Internet-specific aspects of each story. How many, if any, links are there to **unfiltered information** relating to the story? And finally, has this **lead story changed** since the last download of this site?

Political Front Pages

What was there

On the surface at least, the Internet offers plenty of news. Two-thirds of all front pages had at least 16 election-related stories. The exact number varied significantly from site to site, not because of the type of site but because of different judgments of how much was too much. Four sites, Go/ABC News, MSN, MSNBC, and Salon, tended to pack their pages with at least 20 stories. The Washington Post, the New York Times and the National Review also offered a high number of stories (16+). CNN ran a modest amount (11-30), as did Yahoo!! (11-15). Pathfinder, Netscape and AOL News normally ran a low number of stories (5-10).

When you consider the percent of stories with original reporting, the numbers are somewhat less impressive. A full quarter of all front page stories had no original reporting. Original reporting was especially scarce on the so-called web-only portals, sites that aggregated material from supposedly as many sources as possible. Three of the most popular portals, Yahoo!, Netscape and AOL News (which is the news from their portal, not their subscriber-only page) offered no original reporting at all. They relied primarily on wires, with Reuters as the default. Yahoo! also included a handful of stories from National Public Radio.

Front Page Stories with Original Reporting (Percent per web site)		
No stories	**5-15**	**16+**
Yahoo!	MSN*	Natl Rvw
Netscape	CNN*	WPost
AOL	Salon	Go
	Pathfinder	MSNBC
	NYT	
*2/3 of these front pages had 5-15 stories with original reporting while 1/3 had 16+.		

The Old Media did the original reporting. Go/ABC News, MSNBC, the Washington Post and the National Review offered a high level of original reporting (16+ stories). Time Inc.'s Pathfinder had fewer stories in total, but every one was original work. The New York Times, MSN and CNN offered moderate levels (ranging from 6-25).

Interactivity

The Internet has the potential to allow citizens to "take part" in the news in ways never possible in print or broadcast. Users can "vote" for their candidate of choice or respond to a survey that is later written into a story.

Yet surprisingly few interactive links appeared on the pages studied, especially among the web-only sites. Yahoo!, Netscape and AOL News did not have a single interactive component to their front pages. MSNBC, Go/ABC News and the New York Times, offered a minimal amount of interaction as well (1-2 links).

Only one of the major portals, MSN, demonstrated strong initiative, offering eight interactive elements at every download. Still, the Washington Post offered the most. In more than two-thirds of its front page downloads, there were 10 interactive links.

The remaining sites, Pathfinder, the National Review, CNN and Salon offered moderate levels of interactivity (3-7 such links).

NUMBER OF INTERACTIVE LINKS
ON THE FRONT PAGE

No links	1-2	3-7	8-10
Yahoo!	Go*	CNN	MSN
Netscape	MSNBC	Pathfinder	WPost
AOL	NYT	Natl Rvw	
		Salon	

*83% of Go's front pages had 2 links, while 17% of its front pages had 3 links.

Unfiltered Audio and Visual

Another powerful potential of the Internet is access to raw audio or video like a candidates' debate. The sites studied here tended to sit at either extreme: offering almost no unfiltered information or making it an important aspect of their political front page. And that decision bore no relation to the type of site.

Two of the portals, one TV network and one magazine opted out of this feature (Netscape, AOL News, MSNBC and the National Review). Another third of the sites (Go/ABC News, Salon, the Washington Post and the New York Times) normally offered at least seven such links, including one link to a searchable video database sponsored by C-SPAN and Virage.[3] The remaining third (Yahoo!, CNN, Pathfinder and MSN) offered one or two. Most often, these audio-visual links were from C-SPAN.

MOST FREQUENT # OF LINKS TO UNFILTERED INFORMATION

None	One	Two	Seven+
Netscape	Yahoo!	MSN	WPost
MSNBC	CNN		Go*
AOL	Pathfinder		Salon*
Natl Revw			NYT*

*83% of these front pages had 7+ links, while 17% had 1 link.

External Web Sites

Web sites also can serve citizens by offering links to other relevant organizations or sites. For instance, could a citizen read the New York Times site and then click to Congressional Quarterly to check someone's legislative record? Or read a conservative viewpoint in the National Review and then click to a straight news account from the Associated Press?

LINKS TO EXTERNAL NEWS SITES
(Total number on each front page)

HIGH (7+)	MODERATE (4-6)	LOW (1-3)	NONE (0)
MSN	CNN	Go*	Netscape
Yahoo!	Wpost	Pathfinder	AOL
		Salon*	NYT
		Natl Rvw	
		MSNBC	

*These sites each had one page with no such links.

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[3] For the purposes of this study, the CSPAN/Virage database was counted as one link even though it contains a multitude of speeches and other raw material. MSN and CNN contained this link as well.

To measure the extent to which each site did this, we counted the number of links to the home page of other news organizations or to voter groups.[4]

Again, we found this more limited than many might expect. Netscape, the portal of the most popular property, which by definition is meant to help people navigate the Web, linked to no external news or voter sites. Nor did AOL News or the New York Times.

LINKS TO EXTERNAL VOTER SITES (Percent of all front pages per site)			
HIGH (7+)	MODERATE (4-6)	LOW (1-3)	NONE (0)
MSN		Yahoo!	Netscape
Pathfinder		WPost	Go
		Salon	MSNBC
		Natl Rvw	AOL
			NYT
			CNN*

*One CNN page linked to a voter site.

MSN, another portal, offered the most links to external news and voter sites—indeed 16-to-20 news sites and 21-to-25 voter sites.

Its cousin, MSNBC, which is controlled by NBC News, only linked to two news sites and no voter sites.

Yahoo! and CNN had a moderate to high number of news links (5+) but a low number of voter links (2 or less). Pathfinder, on the other hand, proliferated on links to voter sites, but offered very few links to news sites.

The remaining sites—Go/ABC News, National Review, and the Washington Post--offered low numbers of both links (0-4).

Page links

In addition to linking to other home pages, a site could further aid citizens by offering links to specific pages of information. This could be information written and compiled by that web site, or it could be a page of information that someone else compiled. For example, Yahoo! could link to its own candidate biographies or to voter.com's page of biographies.

The study looked for three types of links: policy pages, candidate background pages and pages on the electoral system.

At a time when critics worry that mainstream news organizations may no longer feel they can afford to offer a lot of this information in a 22-minute broadcast, or even in a cable venue fighting for ratings, Internet news sites could easily use such links to provide this information to interested citizens at virtually no cost.

Despite the widespread perception of depth on the Web, we found that the most popular sites offering election news largely ignored this possibility. It is no easier to find out where the candidates stand on policy and values on the most popular net sites than it is elsewhere. Less than half of the sites, mostly those connected to a journalism company--MSNBC, the Washington Post, the New York Times, Go/ABC News, and also Salon regularly offered even one link. CNN offered a rare link in two downloads.

Biographical information was a little more available. The newspaper sites of the New York Times and the Washington Post carried the most (6 or more). Pathfinder always offered four and Salon usually offered two. But again, the portals—Yahoo!, Netscape, MSN and AOL News--offered none. Neither did the National Review.

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[4] We did not include sites owned by the same company, such as a Washington Post link to Newsweek. But we did include links to sites when there was a partnership such as the Washington Post's link to Congressional Quarterly.

The most popular page links were to pages of information about the electoral system and the calendar, which help citizens understand the process. Three sites, MSN, MSNBC and CNN always offered at least 7 links. Go/ABC News, the New York Times and the Washington Post offered moderate levels (4-7+ links). A citizen could not find any of this information on AOL News or the National Review's political front page and only once did Netscape offer such a link.

Lead Stories

Are the stories on the web different than those in newspapers?

Sourcing

Contrary to the idea that the net is full of opinionated argument or unsubstantiated innuendo, campaign sourcing on the Internet was strong. More than one-in-five (21%) of all lead stories had more than seven sources. And overall, more than half had at least five sources.

Only 4% of all the stories had no sourcing. Most of that came from MSN and the National Review. In all, 21% of National Review lead stories were not sourced, as were 17% of MSN stories.

Sourcing on the Web (Total for all lead stories)	
No Sources	4%
1-4	42
5-7	33
8+	21
Total	100

Nearly 90% of all stories led with a named source. A full 100% of first sources on Yahoo!, Go/ABC News, CNN, AOL News, the New York Times and the Washington Post were named.

And, as one might expect, the most common first source was a candidate. Half of all stories studied offered one of the candidates as the first source. Three-quarters of Go/ABC News, MSNBC and CNN stories named a candidate as the first source. Salon was the least likely site to use a candidate as the first source (17%), instead leading more often than other sites with named polls (25%) and with unnamed sources (17%). Still, Pathfinder had a far greater percent of unnamed lead sources than any other site—a full 38%.

Despite the strong sourcing, it was still not as solid as in the traditional newspapers. More than half, 52%, of the newspaper stories have more than seven sources. Only two stories, or 8%, did not have any sourcing at all. The remaining 40% had between 4 and 7 sources.

Percent of Sites' Lead Stories with No Links to Unfiltered Information	
Yahoo!	75%
Netscape	96
AOL	82
MSN	83
Go/ABC	63
MSNBC	33
CNN	83
Pathfinder	58
Salon	75
Natl Rvw	96
NYT	92
WPost	67

The newspapers did have a greater percent of unnamed first sources, 3 stories or 12% versus 6% among the web sites. But they were twice as likely to use an outside expert as their first source (12% versus 5%). They used a voter as the first source twice or in 8% of the stories, which the web sites never did. Further, the newspapers never relied on an outside journalist for the first source, which the web sites did 4% of the time.

Unfiltered links

Within the text of these lead stories, sites can use the Internet's potential to access more detailed information. For instance, a story about McCain's speech regarding Pat Robertson could contain a link to the verbatim text or a recording of the speech.

Few sites in the study took much advantage of this opportunity. Less than one quarter of all stories had any such links.

Only MSNBC had a majority of lead stories with at least one link to unfiltered information (67%). But its cousin, MSN, did so only 17% of the time. This was also the case for CNN and AOL News for 18%. Only two lead stories on the New York Times web site (8%) linked to additional unfiltered information, and Netscape and National Review only supplemented a single story during the period studied.

Interestingly, most of the links to unfiltered information were links to direct primary results.

Immediacy

The Internet is also supposed to be continuous and immediate. We downloaded lead stories four times a day to see how often the lead story changed or was updated. We found that things changed a fair amount. Forty-five percent of all the stories were completely new and 10% of the stories had been edited or added to in some manner. But we also learned that new news does not necessarily mean better or more complete.

Three sites that tended to update the most often seemed to do so purely because they could, rather than to exercise news judgment. Netscape offered the greatest percent of completely new stories (83%), but these were always the straight wire feed and required little if any effort on their end. Yahoo! and AOL News also offered new stories quite frequently (58% and 64%), but they too ran wire feed.

MSNBC was the most likely to simply edit or tack on a new paragraph or two to the previous story. It did this in half of its stories, often resulting in a jumble of various "pieces" of news under one headline by day's end.

Among sites that mostly offered original reporting, the New York Times had the greatest percent of new stories (46%), followed by the National Review (42%) and the Washington Post and Go/ABC News (38% and 37%, respectively). The least timely was Time Inc.'s Pathfinder, which updated only 13% of the time.

Stories were also much more likely to be new in the morning than they were at night, suggesting that perhaps, there is still some sequence to the news cycle. Sixty percent of all the 9 a.m. stories were completely new, while less than a third (31%) were new at 9 p.m. At that nighttime hour, 18% were edited or updated versions of earlier stories, compared with 4% at both 9 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. and 13% at 4:30 p.m.

Aside from the lead stories, most sites only did a moderate amount of updating featured stories. In all, nearly a third, 32%, of the front pages had no changes to their featured stories. Another 30% of the pages only had changes in one or two stories, which includes the lead.

Byline:

The bylines of the lead stories largely mirrored the amount of original reporting found earlier on the political front pages. Portals without formal connections to

journalism companies offered little that was unique. Every single Yahoo!, Netscape and AOL News lead political story was bylined by Reuters. That is quite different than Pathfinder, Salon and Washington Post, which produced 100% of their lead stories. The National Review, New York Times and Go/ABC News led with stories written by their own staffs a vast majority of the time (96%, 83% and 92%, respectively). CNN and MSNBC tended to combine the wire story with their own reporting, while half of all MSN lead stories were written by another news organization.

Topic

The clear majority of lead stories (85%) was purely political (that is they were about horse race, endorsements, staffing, etc. rather than policy, record, biography). This is no surprise given that the days were usually leading into or out of a primary. Still it is worth noting the lack of space given to content relating to the candidates as people or to policy issues. Only 6% of all stories primarily considered the candidate as a person. Only 2%--5 stories out of 72—were about policy. Another 1% dealt with social issues.

The political stories primarily looked at the battle ahead (28% of all stories), tactical maneuvering (21%), or primary results (9%).[5]

Frame

When we looked to see how the topics were treated—or framed—we found, as we have in other studies, that the most popular way to write stories is as straight news accounts—or use of the inverted pyramid (who, what, when, where, how, and why). This made up 46% of all lead stories.

When reporters did use a frame, they focused on the battle. Writing stories around tactics and strategy was the most popular frame (20%), followed by horse race (14%). Again, this is somewhat to be expected in the heat of the primary races. Reporters framed their stories around the political system 6% of the time and around a candidate's leadership ability another 6% of the time. There was not a single lead story written around the candidates' policy beliefs.

Lead Story Frames (Total for all lead stories)	
Tactics & Strategy	20%
Horse Race	14
Candidate's leadership	6
The system	6
Candidate's behavior	3
Other political internals	2
Candidate's health	0
Policy exploration	0
Other	2
Straight News	46
Total	100

These numbers differ somewhat from the front page stories in the New York Times and Washington Post newspapers over the same six days. The newspapers were less likely to offer straight news (24% versus 46% online). They were twice as likely to frame the news around horse race (28% versus 14% online). The papers were less likely to frame the stories around tactics (12% versus 20%). More of their stories focused on the political system (16% versus 6%).

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[5] The difference between tactical maneuvering and the battle ahead is subtle. Tactical maneuvering stories clearly reported on the latest strategy or tactic a candidate was using or would use, while "the battle ahead" talked about an upcoming fight in general, but stopped short of focusing directly on the candidate's tactics.

Looking at specific web sites, the Microsoft portal, MSN, was most likely to write stories around the candidates' leadership abilities (25%), followed by the National Review (17%) and the New York Times (17%).

The Washington Post and Pathfinder, on the other hand, ran the most stories framed as horse race (42% each). All of the remaining Pathfinder stories, 58%, were framed as tactics and strategies. Tactics and strategy was also a popular theme on the National Review site (46%) and on Go/ABC News (42%).

CNN lived up to its reputation as a video wire service that offers the news straight without a lot of spin on the ball. A full 92% of its stories were framed as straight news, even higher than the portals offering largely Reuters wire copy. For instance, 88% of Netscape stories and 73% of AOL News stories were straight news.

Salon carried the greatest variety of frames: 17% were framed around a candidate's current behavior, 17% around other internal politics, 17% around the political system, 17% as other frames, 12% around both tactics and horse race and 8% around a candidate's leadership ability.

Trigger:

What triggered the eventual the lead stories online? Even in the fast-paced world of the net, decisions by journalists, rather than external events, remain a major force. Fully 41% of the stories were triggered from within the newsroom, roughly the same number as those triggered by something the candidates said (39%). Eight percent of all stories were triggered specifically by election results.

Wire stories primarily followed what the candidates said and did. Among the sites that relied on wire copy, Yahoo! tended to run stories triggered by the candidate, 63%, as did AOL News, 50%. CNN and MSNBC, which often combined staff writing with wire service reports, also tended to carry candidate driven stories (71% and 63%, respectively). Netscape was a bit of an anomaly because nearly 4 in 10 lead stories (42%) did not relate to the election. Consequently, 42% of the stories had neither a campaign trigger nor a press trigger.

Pathfinder, Salon, and the National Review, which might be called the online magazines, wrote almost all of their own lead stories and initiated most of them as well. (Pathfinder 96%, Salon 71% and the National Review 83%).

The New York Times and the Washington Post had a greater mix of triggers than did the other sites. On the Times' web site, 42% of stories originated from within the newsroom, 21% were triggered by something the candidate said or did, 17% by a campaign statement or action, 12% by election results, 4% by independent polls and 4% by something else. On the Washington Post site, 46% were press driven, 42% were candidate driven, and 12% were driven by election results.

Site Profiles

AOL.com

America Online has become the biggest Internet service provider in the country largely on the strength of a reputation as a friendly, easy-to-use service. Unfortunately, that attitude doesn't extend to the political news section of its web site.

AOL's politics news page is quite difficult to find. From www.aol.com, one must click on the "news" link, which is about two-thirds of the way down the page and listed with other "Web Centers." This takes the user to "My AOL.com," a news menu which features another link for "News" at the top of the page. Clicking on this link brings the user to a *second* news menu. Roughly a third of the way down this menu is a link to "Latest Politics (Reuters)." Scroll, click, scroll, click, scroll, click. Whew.

Once the user has found the page, he or she may wonder if the effort was worth it. The page features the headlines and first paragraphs of ten articles, all provided by Reuters. However, during the period of our study, only 4 to 7 of these stories at any given time were actually political stories. The others dealt with subjects like foreign policy or Presidential activity. As is the case with Netscape's Political News Channel, this suggests that it's simply where AOL puts stories about policy and process, as well as those about politics.

AOL offers no interactive opportunities, no links to other news sites or resource pages, and no audio/visual content. What it does offer is promotions—links to AOL's NetMail feature, to a download site for AOL Instant Messenger, and to AOL's Community Directory.

Lead Stories:

The lead stories are what one might expect from a site that relies wholly on wire service copy. Reading through its coverage is a lot like reading through the political wire cue in a newsroom.

The stories are largely short—less than 20 paragraphs—and very reactive. Reading the lead political story on AOL is like getting a snapshot of that moment on the day you look. The stories are updated constantly, but they lack an overall context and depending on when the reader happens by he or she may miss news.

On February 28, the day of John McCain's Virginia Beach speech, a casual reader checking in at our times would have found nothing in the lead story on what was undoubtedly the biggest political news of the day. Instead, the pieces that appeared were stage-setters for upcoming primaries and, later in the day, coverage of Gore campaign speeches. This may have been due to the particular times we surfed by, but that is, in some ways, the point.

The news users get here is completely determined by when they choose to visit. AOL and many of the other portals we examined do little to help make the news meaningful or place it in context.

CNN/AllPolitics.com

CNN's AllPolitics page is a lot like its TV cousin: Straightforward, solid and a lot of it.

Also like its cable-TV counterpart, it has not adopted the edge and attitude of net. This is Buick, not BMW.

Still, this is one of the richer and more user friendly sites we found.

The page is easily reached by clicking the "Politics" link in the upper left-hand corner of cnn.com. It leads off with a main story followed by several other "featured" stories—it lists earlier stories further down the page.

Readers can also access selected political stories from the current issue of Time magazine. In fact, between the site's own coverage and Time's, the page never featured fewer than 20 stories during the days we studied.

CNN does one of the better jobs of providing access to other resources—links to prior coverage, delegate counts, primary results, candidate bios, and other useful information in a pull-down menu at the top of the page. The pull-down feature keeps things uncluttered, but there's a trade off . It also makes it easy to overlook the information. The site also features a link to the CSPAN/Virage video archive, though CNN does not offer the useful and time-saving search capabilities featured on some of the other sites examined.

Lead Stories:

CNN deserves credit for the way it handles lead stories. While it could use its 24-hours-a-day TV format to update just for the sake of updating, the site's producers seem to make those decisions based more on the significance of the news than on their ability to do so. Overall, the lead stories were completely new 54% of the time. CNN also seems to pick and choose its lead stories by similar judgment of what it deems best rather than what is produced in house. Its lead pieces usually were a mix of wire and staff reports combined (70%). A quarter of the stories were generated solely by CNN.

The pieces were generally quite lengthy—two thirds were more than 26 paragraphs long—and were usually framed as straight news—91 percent of the stories. The stories were also largely reactive, written in response to something a candidate said or did, but they usually included some attempt at analysis beyond the John said George said.

In general, this is a good place to get a feel for the ebb and flow of the news. Looking at CNN's site on March 6, for instance, one could see the media shift from painting Super Tuesday as a big day to the likely end to the primary season. The early stories, 9 a.m. and 12:30 p.m., were general round-ups "Crunch time for candidates as Super Tuesday looms." But by 4:30 p.m. there was a feeling of finality to the lead, "Strong 'Super Tuesday' showings by Bush, Gore could narrow the field." By 9 p.m. the headline had become "Super Tuesday sweeps by Bush, Gore could settle party contests."

The lead stories on Allpolitics.com seem to fit well with the CNN franchise. This makes sense for brand identification. But it is not clear how much the site will extend CNN to a new audience of younger or hipper viewers who are not already the news junkies who watch its 24-7 cable coverage.

GO.com

Go's political page is one of the best web-portal pages we looked at. Its affiliation with ABC News separated it from Yahoo! and Netscape by giving it original content and an identity that was something more than just a wire-service outlet.

At first glance, the site is a lot like other portals, with links to a number of category headings like Games, Health, Money. But on top of the homepage are two big differences—direct links to Disney's ESPN and ABC News sites. We found consistently throughout this study, sites with a true connection to a journalism company, offered a better product and a deeper use of the net than those that relied solely on another organization for their news.

 Readers simply click on the ABC News Link and once there, they click on the "politics" button in the left-hand column of the page. This leads to the Political Nation Summary.

Go's politics page is one of the more story-heavy pages we studied, with 20 or more stories at all times. The bulk of these stories were original reporting by ABC News personnel. Some stories were text-based, while others were broadcast ABC stories.

Supplemental stories came from a variety of newspapers, rather than from a single wire service, which indicates that there's a greater degree of editorial oversight in their selection here than at some other sites.

Other resources on the page include primary returns, candidate bios, an interactive exit poll, a link to the CSPAN/Virage video search engine, and a search of the campaign donor database. The page also links to ABC News and the New York Times' political chat.

Lead Stories:

The lead stories we found were an interesting mix of straight news and analysis based apparently on some subtle attempt at branding**.** Though almost all were written by ABC News staff—92 %--the pieces varied greatly in tone depending on who exactly wrote the story. And recognizable ABC News personalities seemed to get more editorial leeway.

On March 6, for instance, the morning lead by staff writer Carter Yang was "Bush, McCain Fight to Finish," a piece that largely dealt with the trading of allegations between the campaigns. But the afternoon lead by ABC News's Ann Compton, "General Interest**,**" was a look at the campaign's strategic situation. Compton explained how Super Tuesday was already old news to the campaigns and how their strategies were really concerned with November. Though the piece was not without sources, there was a lot of the author's analysis gluing it all together.

One interesting side point**:** Compton's piece was set apart from the rest of the material on the site. In addition to editorial leeway, Compton was given a mug shot and the rubric "On Background" on her piece. While the added flash was supposed to signify the reader was getting the inside dope on the race, apparently no one at ABC thought "On Background," which in journalistic speak means material is withheld from the reader, is a curious title to give something added appeal.

MSN.com

The best way to describe the political page of the Microsoft Network portal, MSN, is a kind of Hotline for the Internet. With a puckish tone, the page basically summarizes the biggest political stories of the day from the biggest papers and gives readers the chance to click on the summaries to read the entire pieces themselves.

MSN likes to brag that the site is "powered by" the Internet magazine Slate, and the presence of the Michael Kinsley edited online magazine does show in the page's attitude, the quality of the editorial decisions and the presence of Slate material. The page, which is easily accessible from msn.com by clicking the "Politics" link on the left-hand side, is a good cheat sheet for political reporters.

The top stories on MSN's Politics page are listed in a column down the center, with headlines and one or two descriptive sentences. This page features both original stories and links to stories by other news organizations. And while this is a somewhat common practice on the Internet—we've seen this done at sites like Salon and the New York Times—MSN/Slate is unusual in that it treats many of these externally generated stories the same way it does original pieces. Between original reporting and external stories, MSN never ran fewer than 20 pieces at any given time.

MSN also offers a number of stories and other features provided in a column paid for by Netivation's Votenet, a service that designs web sites for political campaigns. While advertising on web sites is nothing new, we thought this approach was worth

noting, both for the fact that it provides substantive information and resources and because it's aimed at the people who run campaigns, not the people who vote in elections.

MSN/Slate also offers copious links to other news sites; between 16 and 20 on the days we examined the site. It also provides links to campaign calendars, the Federal Election Commission, the web sites of the major and minor political parties, and the C-SPAN/Virage video archive, as well as to its own discussion forum and several off-site message boards

The biggest strength of MSN/Slate's Politics page is its use of external sites to give users both a full picture of the day's news as reported by others, and the tools to learn more about the campaign, the candidates, and the issues. One nifty feature lets readers enter their zip code to see what their neighbors are contributing and to whom. But this is also a weakness; at times, the page feels more like a weblog than a news page.
Lead Stories:

While the leads were often not from Slate—about 50 percent of the time they came from another news organization—they were almost always significant. And in some ways gathering the lead stories by combing the web for political information showed more editorial thought than simply putting a Slate story on top.

Many people correctly attack the Internet for not having original content and some might say MSN is being lazy by simply posting other organization's stories on the top of their site. But by singling out what its editors believed was the most interesting or important piece of political news--regardless of the byline—MSN/Slate is doing users a service. This is both a smart portal and news site in one.

MSN's mischievous nature—Slate also was the news organization that broke an embargo on exit poll data—sometimes rears its head in the stories the site selects. On March 6, for example, the two early times we visited the site, 9 a.m. and 12:30 p.m., the lead was a piece from the Washington Post's site about none other than how Slate had broken the exit poll embargo. But at 4:30 p.m. and 9 p.m., the lead was a link to the Weekly Standard's pieces about Bush and Catholics.

The original reporting from Slate itself is also worth noting. For one thing the pieces are usually shorter than a lot of others, which is frankly refreshing. They were by and large also interesting. But they were generally think pieces with little or no reporting—and occasionally more attitude than thinking. Here we found the net that some people have come to imagine.

Nonetheless, this is among the strongest political web sites we found, especially for the political class.

MSNBC.com

This site is not to be confused with MSN.com. MSNBC.com is the official online presence of the television networks MSNBC and NBC News. MSN, in contrast, is run by Microsoft and its subsidiaries, and its political page is produced by Slate.

You can tell the difference. This site doesn't reach beyond its newsroom and has some of the weaknesses of MSNBC cable and not enough of the experience and synthesis of NBC News.

Anyone who's watched more than ten minutes of MSNBC has heard anchors and reporters refer viewers to msnbc.com for more information. Anyone looking for political news will have to do a fair-to-middling amount of digging to get it.

Going to www.msnbc.com takes the user to the site's "cover" page. Clicking the "news" button atop the menu in the left-hand column leads to a page that asks the user if he or she wants to download the MSNBC News Menu. Don't say yes or you will have to sit through a lengthy download that isn't what you're looking for. Clicking "no" leads to the MSNBC's news index page. About halfway down this page is a link to the Politics Section.

The page leads off with a bold red headline and four featured stories above a menu of webcast reports, interactive elements, and election information links. MSNBC tended to have a high number of stories, never fewer than 20, and these tended to be a mix of original pieces and stories from NBC's new partners, the Washington Post or Newsweek. In this regard, MSN/Slate drew from a larger universe of journalism.

In addition to an interactive bulletin board, the page also added interactive elements to its candidate profiles and issues pages. One nice feature was something called "candidate matchmaker," which allowed users to compare their opinions on issues to those of the Presidential candidates. MSNBC deserves credit for bringing some interactivity to these fairly common features.

Perhaps surprisingly, the MSNBC Politics section features no links to unfiltered audio/visual material. The few video elements available on the site tend to be webcasts of NBC and MSNBC stories, but not full audio/video of speeches, debates and the like.
Lead Stories:

The site wants you to know that it is "up to date" and that means its lead stories are updated —sometimes ad nauseam—throughout the day. And while updating may be the heart and soul of journalism, MSNBC's updates sometimes offer little more than an additional paragraph from a wire story.

The effects of this practice are three-fold. First the majority of pieces (67%) are written jointly by staff and wire services. Second, the pieces are quite long—more than 8 in ten were more than 26 paragraphs. And third, by the end of the day the pieces are sometimes like giant balls of lint—there's a little of everything, but not a lot of coherence. There seems to be no distinction between updating a story to provide more information, clarification, or perspective and updating for the sake of updating.

Still, the news here is comprehensive, though we sometimes wondered why the stories couldn't have had a little more NBC and little less MS. They don't really tap the potential of NBC News here that much. As an example, more full video of speeches and other events would have been a welcomed addition to simply seeing the short TV pieces about these events.

On the day of McCain's Virginia Beach speech, for instance, the site did include audio clips of some of the speech—short ones. But its video link was more self-promotional, a network report on Bush's apology for his Bob Jones speech.

While not a bad site, one is left wondering whether the push toward soft news and prime time magazine infotainment stories at NBC News are coming home to roost in the unrealized potential of this web site.

National Review Online

This is not your father's National Review. NRO tries to be the hipper offspring of its paper-bound namesake. How much hipper? Would William F. Buckley ever have

headlined a story, "How McCain Bitch-Slapped Pete King," the way NRO did on February 24?

While that's not exactly standard Buckley phrasing—unless we missed the "Firing Line" Puffy Combs interview—the piece was an interesting look at how, even after a short-lived but rather nasty public feud, Long Island Rep. Peter King came to endorse John McCain. The piece read like a lot of the material on this site—interesting and provocative.

News is front and center--not buried--on this site. All of its current content is listed on its front page. This makes it easier for a visitor to find political news, but probably has more to do with the fact that The National Review is a political magazine, as opposed to a more general-interest news source. Updates to the site during the period of our study were frequent; on big news days (primaries, McCain's Virginia Beach speech), it was not unusual for the site to be updated several times a day. Stories are easy to find thanks to clear headings at the top.

NRO includes news pieces focused on specific issues (McCain speeches, primary results, etc.) with an editorial bent, more general opinion columns by contributors, Q&As, and links to selected articles from the print edition of the National Review. Interactive elements include a "question of the day" feature called Vox Populi and two reader forums.

Like its parent magazine, NRO makes no bones about its ideological stance. That acknowledgment makes the site appealing to those who share its philosophy and serves as fair notice to those who don't.

Lead Stories:

The choice of lead stories show this site is not suffering from an identity crisis like so many of the other old-media entrants on the net. The pieces were always written by staff and were updated daily, except for weekends when stories sometimes lingered. But NRO largely avoided covering breaking news and stuck to its franchise: conservative think pieces that dealt with the news of the day, but didn't necessarily react to it.

The site also didn't skimp on the bylines of its featured web pieces. The stories were not written by interns or some kid in the office who just happens to know html. Contributors include William F. Buckley, National Review Editor Rich Lowry and magazine regular Kate O'Beirne. And while none of the pieces was an epic treatise— nearly all were less then ten paragraphs--clearly the site is meant to be a supplement to the hard-copy magazine, not a mirror of it or a replacement for it.

Still, as the bitch-slapping episode points out, the web does offer a chance for the magazine to push some boundaries—and, when necessary, sometimes pull them back. By 4:30, after a good lunch and perhaps an e-mail from the boss, the headline on the piece in question was changed to "How McCain Ripped Pete King."

Netscape.com

Netscape may be the **most popular** portal on the web and the darling of the anti-Microsoft camp, but its political news page was perhaps the most anemic one we examined. Even in the weak field of web portals, it offered remarkably little. The site featured no original reporting, no interactive elements, and offers little in the way of additional resources. It really looks like it exists only because a portal has to have news of some sort.

Even finding political news on Netscape can be a bit of a chore. First, the user must click on one of the "Latest News" headlines on Netscape's home page. This takes the user to that story and a menu of news topics. Clicking the "Political News" link in that menu will finally bring the user to news about politics.

Once the user has finally found it, Netscape's Political News page usually offers links to only a modest number of stories, between five and ten. Moreover, these stories can be summarized in three words: Reuters wire copy. All the stories came directly from the foreign-based Reuters wire service. Another problem is the stories are listed by headline alone, without the aid of any summary or lead paragraph. This often makes the headlines seem to blur together.

And many of the stories listed at any given time had little to do with politics, but were rather about foreign policy development, congressional votes, presidential appointments, and other governmental events. It may be true that there's often a fuzzy line between politics and policy, but the inclusion of articles about former CIA chief John Deutch's potential security breaches with his home computer or the presence of a U.S. envoy in Eritrea suggests that there is little editorial oversight of the page. It may be used as a home for governmental stories that don't fit into the other news categories on the Netscape site.

The Netscape Political News page has no interactive features or external news or voter links; what links are present take the user to other Netscape directory pages.

Lead Stories:

As for its lead stories Netscape can take some pride in the fact that the pieces were changed regularly, even over the weekends. In all, more than 80% of the time its lead story was different at every four-hour interval.

These stories, not surprisingly, were also very reactive and were primarily focused on breaking news. The stories are on top of what is immediately happening, but they generally lack the perspective of the campaign stories that appear in the morning newspaper or on a nightly broadcast because the news is incomplete.

The day after the McCain's Michigan primary win, for instance, the page's lead stories marked the individual turns of American politics for the day. At 9 a.m. the political page led with "Bush Finds Silver Lining in Loss, Turns to Calif." By 12:30 p.m., the page had switched to a completely different story, "McCain Back in Race After Mich Victory." Four hours later the page was warning of how "Key Senators Say China Deal in Jeopardy." By 9 p.m., the page had jumped to the New Jersey Senate race with "Florio Crushing Corzine in Senate Race—N.J. Poll."

A reader's idea of the day's most important political story, in other words, would be completely contingent upon when the reader happened to surf by, and not upon what an editorial staff has determined based on what's happening in the world. More difficult, some of the top stories from early in the day were entirely missing from the site a few hours later.

Pathfinder/Time.com

The good news is that Time magazine's political page features the same serious, insightful reporting that the magazine is famous for—at least, some wags might say, before it started running cover stories on Ricky Martin and Leonardo DiCaprio.

The page features long stories that put the week's events in some kind of perspective and are a change of pace from the shorter, more deadline-driven pieces elsewhere on the web.

The bad news is that what the page does is very limited. It runs only a handful of stories and does not change them for an entire week. In fact, CNN's Allpolitics page generally features more political articles from the current issue of Time than does Time's own page.

Time's political page is fairly easily reached by clicking the "Newsfiles" link near the top of the left-hand column of the time.com site. Once at the Newsfiles page, the Campaign 2000 page is at the top.

The page features links to one or two stories from each week's edition of Time, plus links to earlier articles, as well. The site, however, is relatively rich in other materials. There is a link to a list of the top donors to each party (though it is too general), and photo essays about some of the candidates. There are also biographical pages, and these include links to previous Time articles, to official campaign sites, and to profiles by the Center for Responsive Politics.

The page also does a fair job of providing links to many external resources, such as the FEC and the Democratic and Republican Congressional Campaign Committees. It features an interactive poll and links to time.com's message boards. The main drawback here is that the page is only updated once a week.

Lead Stories:

The lead story made us feel this site is an old-media presence unsure of its place in the new media world. It basically offers the reader a chance to go through Time's lead political story of the week without plunking down $3.50 at the newsstand or getting a subscription. Thus it uses the Internet as marketing for its magazine, rather than a separate entity. This may explain why the site provides such a limited taste of what the magazine is offering for a price.

And while the web site can feel good about giving the reader the context often missing on some of the portal sites, its commitment to "repurposing" content (read: not changing the magazine stories it posts) often made it seem irrelevant. With McCain and Bush trading seesaw victories every Tuesday, all the newsweeklies were caught this year with cover stories that often seemed a week behind.

In the end, this makes the site feel more like a library of old magazines than part of an instantaneous new medium. The most interesting aspect is seeing how the primary race has changed since the magazine went to print.

SALON.com

Salon is probably best known in this election cycle for being the home of the reporter who tried to pass his cold to Gary Bauer by actively smearing his germs on everything the candidate came in contact with. But if one can ignore all the sneezing and door-knob licking (granted, that's not so easy) this site has some well-considered pieces.

Salon is a reasonably good idea of what an Internet magazine could be—mixing Internet tone and attitude with good reporting.

The online magazine's political content is easy to find. A simple click on the upper left-hand corner of the site's home, salon.com, takes a reader to the Politics2000 page. Once at Politics2000, there is several days' worth of political reporting, more than

20 stories at any given time during the period we examined. Updates can be frequent, when news is breaking or the site has an exclusive story.

The page includes straight news reporting, enterprise pieces, opinion pieces by Salon columnists, and reports from the campaign trail. Salon also provides directories that sort previous coverage by candidate, issue, and by "hot topics" like specific primaries or religion. Stories are listed by headline, with one- or two-sentence descriptions and the site's original reporting is supplemented with headline links to stories from the Associated Press and from CBS News.

On the interactive front there is a poll and links to its Table Talk forums – message boards where visitors can discuss specific topics or individual Salon articles. Salon also links to the C-SPAN/Virage video archive, and offers pull-down menus that help users tailor their search by candidate, party, or state.

Politics2000 has the same "voice" as the rest of Salon, which is to say, breezy, a little jaundiced, smart and occasionally sophomoric. It tries to inform without taking the subject matter entirely seriously.

Lead Stories:

In its lead political stories Salon manages the balance between being a magazine and a web-site quite well. The stories are updated regularly, but they still hold a level of analysis and depth not seen in many of the constant update sites.

One can only wonder how much caffeine Salon reporters ingest since all the stories were staff written, most were lengthy, and sometimes the same reporter posted multiple stories a day.

The pieces generally lean left and the vast majority, 71%, were triggered by newsroom decisions. But for the most part they were well reported. Even the commentary in the lead pieces rarely leapt into a topic without first citing information.

Also worth noting is that contrary to the prevailing conventional wisdom, some of Salon's pieces were full of serious enterprise and investigative reporting. On March 5, for instance, Salon turned back to the topic of February 29th's Washington Primary and considered the possibility that McCain, long ago declared the loser by the mainstream media, might actually win the vote when all the absentee ballots were counted.

Of course, Salon also sometimes uses its magazine credentials as an excuse to do less tough-minded pieces. One lead story devoted itself entirely to comparing the vice president to Godfather character Michael Corleone, referring to the veep as Al Goreleone. Some ideas are best left to sleep with the fishes.

NewYorkTimes.com

The Times' online presence is as close to a digital replica of the paper as one can get. There is little visual flash. Even on the Politics page, the color scheme is black and white, with the Old English masthead off to the side. In many ways, the site reflects its parent paper in content as well: it's thorough, it's sober, and it's rich in useful information.

The Politics page's main attraction is its listing of the political stories from that day's newspaper, with usually five to ten featured stories and 16 to 20 stories overall. These original stories are supplemented by a column of political and campaign stories from the Associated Press wire service. These AP stories were updated throughout the day during our study. The politics page, which is easily accessed by clicking the

"politics" link in the menu in the upper left-hand of nytimes.com, also offers links to selected election-related columns from the newspaper.

Along with political stories from the paper, the site also links to pages it has created about specific candidates, a delegate count by the AP, a campaign calendar, photo galleries, and a link to the C-SPAN/Virage video search engine. For those looking to get more interactive there is Times' political discussion forums and an interactive poll. The site also features a countdown of the number of days left until the election. The New York Times' Politics page is corner of the Times' front page.

Lead Stories:

The lead story on the Times Political page is an interesting mix. The stories were overwhelmingly written by staff—83 percent of the time—and the morning political lead on the web was without exception the same as the paper's. But the site did not just sit on its hard copy content. When situation warranted**,** the paper changed its lead accordingly. The key phrase here being "when situation warranted."

Often Internet sites seem to update stories simply because they can, but like the Post's web site, the Times showed prudent restraint. It turned to that old-school idea of editorial judgement to help it decide when and how to update its stories. A good example is how the page handled the news on February 28, the day McCain gave his Virginia Beach speech.

At 9 a.m., the page led with a piece by Todd Purdum about the GOP's struggles to unite the party in California. By 12:30, the site had changed the lead to reflect McCain's speech. And even though the Times story was not yet ready to go, the site posted an Associated Press account to keep readers informed—along with the text of the speech. At the time of our next check, 4:30 p.m., the page still led with the McCain story, by now it had been written by staff, David Barstow. The story remained up for our 9 p.m. check as well.

The Times web stories, like those in the newspaper tended to be lengthy—usually more than 26 paragraphs—and the pieces were heavy on analysis.

In short, nytimes.com has carried over many of its better old-media habits to the new media without losing site of some of the web's capabilities. While it may lack some of the bells and whistles of washingtonpost.com, it still has New York Times quality judgment.

WashingtonPost.com

Interestingly, it is one of the giants of the old-media world that probably made the best use of what the new media has to offer. The Post's OnPolitics page mirrors the paper in tone and quality of reportage, but it also makes good use of its ability to update information and provides the user with many interactive options.

The page relies on its own people for most of its content and there are a lot of stories to read here daily. The page also offers links to previous series of articles on the main candidates, on George W. Bush's record as governor, and to a menu of stories about campaign issues and about the major events of the campaign to date.

The page, which is easily found by clicking the "Politics" button in the upper right-hand corner of washingtonpost.com, also features a number of "online extras," or web-exclusive columns. These include an ad watch by media reporter Howard Kurtz and two columns focusing on politics outside the Beltway, and an audio editorial cartoon, as well

as more common online resources like a campaign calendar, delegate tallies, and photo galleries.

But OnPolitics' really shines in its attempt to take advantage of the interactive opportunities the Internet provides. In addition to an online poll and an online game, the page gives the user the chance to participate in chats with Post reporters, columnists, and outside experts. These chats are more focused than some online forums and provide users a chance to interact with knowledgeable individuals and not just their fellow Internet surfers.

The Post links to C-SPAN's Virage video archive with pull-down candidate and party menus to help users narrow their search for the footage they're interested in.

The OnPolitics page, like the New York Times' politics page, gets most of its content from its print parent, but doesn't limit itself to that.

Lead Stories:

The Post's lead stories were always staff written. The page seemed to key its changes on significant developments in the race. Stories rarely changed for the sake of changing, but on days when real news was breaking the Post' page updated regularly.

The way the stories were handled suggests the Post's site is relatively comfortable in the new media world. Its model for lead story changes stays relatively true to the newspaper mission—it used editorial judgement to treat its lead updates like old-time newspaper Extras.

The site also took its cues from the newspaper in other ways. The morning lead story was without exception the lead political story in the paper, which meant it was relatively long—usually more than 26 paragraphs—and usually citing more than seven sources.

Overall, washingtonpost.com belies the impression that the old media are at a loss online. That is not true at the Washington Post, at least when it comes to the business of Washington—politics.

Yahoo.com

Another of the portals we looked at that gave us that feeling of reading through the political wire cue. If you can actually take the time to sit and read through everything on the page you might find it to be thorough on the whole, but its story selection was quirky. And though it was regularly updated, it was less than scintillating.

Like the other portals we examined, almost all of the news on Yahoo!'s page is provided by Reuters—with each story listed by headline followed by a line or two of the actual piece. The site also offered a few stories from National Public Radio, which can be listened to by people who have installed RealPlayer on their computer. Of the stories featured on the page, five to ten of them were campaign related. The rest, as was true of the other portals, were anything remotely related to the federal government.

Yahoo! offers more links to other resources and news sites than the other portal pages we examined. It included links to the Yahoo! Politics page (which is separate from the Politics News page), to a "Find Your Representative" page, and to a variety of news sites aimed at both the general audience and the political junkie. These features make it the best news resource we found among the portal sites we studied—though other non-portal sites still offered more.

The page was fairly easy to find. After getting to Yahoo!.com, one had to click the "News" link at the top of the screen, then look for "Politics" in a menu on the left on Yahoo!'s Daily News page.

Lead Stories:

Like Netscape and AOL, Yahoo! relies on Reuters for its political coverage. And like those two sites its lead stories often seem to have been chosen more by chance than design.

The stories primarily focused on breaking news and were most often triggered by a candidate's actions. The stories generally stay up on what is immediately happening, but they generally lack the perspective of campaign roundup stories that appear in the morning newspaper or on a nightly broadcast. The reports are snapshots of the campaign throughout the day.

And occasionally there are glaring omissions. The day of McCain's Virginia Beach speech, for instance, Yahoo!'s lead political story never touched on the topic.

For those hungry for change**,** the site offers constant updates. But readers hoping to keep up on the nation's biggest political news by dropping by a site now and then might find life difficult in Yahoo!'s world.

Methodology

Twelve Internet web sites were monitored for six days during the heat of the primary election season: February 23, 24, 27, 28 and March 5 and 6. Each day, we downloaded the sites four times, based roughly around the average workday. Download sessions began at 9:00 a.m., 12:30 p.m., 4:30 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. Each download took between 20 and 45 minutes.

Web sites were selected to develop a sample of the election news offered on the Internet today. We wanted to include the most popular portals and news sites as well as some magazines and news sites of the national newspapers. The portals and news sites were based on Media Metrix's February, 2000 ratings. We chose the top four portals that contained election news (Netscape, Yahoo!, Go and MSN) and the top four web sites that contained election news (AOL News, MSNBC, Pathfinder, CNN). We then added two magazine sites (Salon and the National Review) and two sites from national newspapers (the Washington Post and the New York Times.)

We also selected two national newspapers (the Washington Post and the New York Times) to study as a control group.

Inclusion and Screening

Once the web sites were selected, the political front page for each web site was found. The front pages selected were defined as the most direct way to political news from the site's home page. The AOL political front page is the news site from aol.com, not their subscriber-only portal.   The Yahoo! political page studied was the political page accessed from their own "News" link across the top banner, not the link from their "Sites"category located in the body of the page.

The political home pages are as follows:
Netscape: www.netscape.com
Yahoo!: www.Yahoo.com
Go: www.Go.com
MSN: www.msn.com
MSNBC: www.msnbc.com
CNN: www.cnn.com
Pathfinder/Time Inc: www.pathfinder.com
AOL News: www.aol.com
Salon: www.salon.com
National Review: www.nationalreview.com
New York Times: ww.nytimes.com
Washington Post: www.washingtonpost.com

The political front pages and the lead stories on those pages were captured through one of three Internet service providers (ISPs): Earthlink, Erols or AOL. Testing was done to be sure the pages did not differ among the servers. Each page and lead story was captured, saved to a disk and printed out landscape style. Downloads took between 20 and 45 minutes.[6] Exact times of each download are noted, and the order was rotated.

On Feb. 23, due to technical difficulties, the 4:30 PM AOL News and the 9:00 PM Washington Post downloads were incomplete. The 4:30 AOL download was irretrievable and that download was inputted at missing data. Therefore, AOL News had one fewer download than the other sites. For the Washington Post, the front page file was corrupted and irretrievable. Therefore, the front page data was inputted as missing data, but the lead story was fully coded. The Post had one fewer front page than did other sites.

Any missed downloads on the Pathfinder pages were fully retrievable as the site did not change in a week's time. And Pathfinder staff was able to tell us exactly what had appeared and where it now was on the site.

The print newspaper sample consisted of election-related front page stories. They were captured via Lexis-Nexis and compared to the actual newspaper. There were few enough stories that we could monitor each front page individually to capture all stories that were at least 50% about the 2000 election.

The resulting project sample consisted of 72 political front pages and 286 lead stories as well as 25 newspaper stories, all of which were fully coded and are included in the final data analysis.

Coding Process
Researchers worked with a detailed, standardized coding scheme. All pages were first coded for basic inventory variables: source, date, download time, etc. Then, front pages for the 9 AM downloads only were coded for content variables: number of stories, amount of original reporting, number of interactive elements, links to external sites,

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[6] There were two exceptions to this timetable. The initial download, 9 a.m. on Feb. 23, began at 9 a.m. and was completed at 10:32 a.m. The 12:30 p.m. download on February 23, began at 12:30 p.m. and was completed by 1:30 p.m.

number of feature stories, etc. Next, the lead story of each front page was coded. First it was coded for content: number of sources, general topic, amount of unfiltered material, 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.