

Election Newshounds Speak Up

Newspaper, TV and Internet Fans Tell How and Why They Differ

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If you ask political news consumers what they like most about their favorite source of news, a vivid image of a typical TV, newspaper, and internet political news consumer will emerge from their own comments. That's what the Pew Internet & American Life Project asked in its 2006 post-election survey, and from the responses you could almost see the newspaper reader -- straight from Norman Rockwell -- settling down in a favorite chair near a warm fire, shaking the paper open, and smoothing it flat to read the political news analysis. Next would be the TV watcher, perhaps a harried parent, bustling around the kitchen throwing dinner together, dodging the dog, checking kids' homework, and keeping an ear and occasional eye on the evening campaign news; or a quieter version of that home where the TV is on in the background, out of habit or to provide company. Then the internet user, a multi-tasker in the home or business office, a fast-mover, clicking windows open and shut, skimming a blog while downloading a long attachment, searching for a candidate's video clip while pondering an email reply.

Just after the midterm elections in the fall of 2006, the Pew Internet & American Life Project polled Americans about their political [news sources](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/199/report_display.asp). (http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/199/report_display.asp) We asked people if they were getting most of their election news from the television, newspapers, radio, magazines, or the internet. As ever, television was the walk-away favorite. Over two-thirds of respondents (69%) said they got most of their political news from television; about a third (34%) said newspapers, and 15% said the internet.¹

But the underdog internet is gaining quickly. Compared with data gathered after the most recent mid-term election in 2002, the percentage of Americans who reported they went to the internet for most of their political news in 2006 more than doubled, from 7% to 15%. During the same time period, the percentage of those getting their political input from TV and newspapers remained essentially static, increasing from 66% to 69% for TV, and from 33% to 34% for newspapers.

We probed further, asking people to reflect on what it was about what they particularly liked about their preferred medium for campaign and election news -- TV, newspaper, or internet --that set it apart from the other forms of media. Nearly all respondents gave us an answer, often a word or two and sometimes a few sentences.

The fun starts here. But first, a quiz for you: Can you match the respondents' following answers (a sample from some of the most common qualities) with the proper medium: television, newspapers, or internet?

- a) Enjoyable. In-depth. I can think about it. I can review it.
- b) Easy. Live. I can do something at the same time. It's just there.
- c) Control. Quick. Choice. Convenient.

In case you aren't absolutely sure of your answer, here is a further hint: Each comment below is taken verbatim from the responses, and each belongs with the description above bearing the same letter. That is to say (a) below belongs with (a) above.

- a) "I just enjoy reading my newspaper."
- b) "I don't really know what it is I like about it." (from a TV lover.)
- c) "It's exactly what you want when you want it." (from an internet aficionado.)

Peas in a Pod: Where TV, newspapers, and the internet have similar appeal

In some respects, the reasons Americans gave for preferring TV, newspapers, or the internet were indistinguishable. Among the nearly 1,750 responses, two qualities appeared very frequently as reasons for favoring all three media types: a sense of convenience and an absence of bias.

Convenient

All three media forms win praise from their primary fans for their convenience. While convenience probably appeared most frequently as an appreciated quality, the context for its definition varied. For most TV watchers, convenience meant that political-news viewing fit right in as they went about their daily activities. It was just there in the background to be multitasked with housework, office work, dinner preparations, care of children, or chores.

"I can do other things in the house while watching the news."
"I can hear it while doing chores about the house."

For newspaper readers, the definition of convenience usually hovered around aspects of time, particularly the convenience to choose the moment or the pace.

"It's something I do at my own time. I set the time."
"You're able to read whenever you want or have time."
"Take it at your own pace."
"I can look at it when I want to."
"I can read it when I have time."

For a few, convenience meant how newspapers come, and how they go.

"It's available. It comes in the morning and sits on the kitchen table. My computer is upstairs and it's just sitting there."
"When I'm done reading the newspaper, I can just throw it away."

Among internet users, comments about convenience eclipsed all other kinds of comments. The context was thorough, including where, when, and how.

"Gets me to what I want to see fastest. Can skim."
"Quick. Right there in front of you and saves you a lot of time"
"Can look at it when I want instead of scheduling around the TV."
"Instant access."
"I can work and check the political sites at the same time."

Or simply: "Convenience. Convenience."

Unbiased

Many TV watchers, newspaper readers, and internet users also reported they favored their chosen medium for its absence of bias.

For TV watchers, absence of bias meant telling the truth or covering all sides:

"They tell the truth. They report the whole thing."
"They discuss both sides"

“They tell it like it is.”
“Fox is fairer and lets everybody have their own opinion.”
“They make it easy; two people from each side. Republican, Democrat.”

Among newspaper readers, absence of bias meant finding many stories or opinions from many different writers, and even at many different papers.

“I’m not stuck with a biased opinion. I have more options.”
“I like to try and get both sides of the story.”
“I like looking at the different slants and how they peg a story.”
“It usually gives me both sides of an issue. It seems to be more objective.”

Internet users sounded similar.

“You can research and get the truth regarding a situation or a fact.”
“I can look at both parts. I’m not looking at biased TV shows.”
“It’s not all one-sided.”
“Can go to different news sites to see if it’s biased.”

Up-to-date.

The chance to be immediately on top of the news was an important draw for TV watchers and internet users. On this point, newspaper readers were quiet.

Said the TV watchers:

“They have the latest and nearest news.”
“Live, right then and there.”
“I like the real time commentary from the different pundits.”

Said the internet users:

“It’s a newspaper in real time”
“Up-to-date and up to the minute.”
“Minute by minute, I find out right as things are happening.”

Broad and Deep .

Newspaper readers and internet users both pointed to the rich content of their medium as an important quality. TV watchers were more complicated; some said they watched TV for the rich coverage, while others said they watched it for the concise and brief snapshots of the political news. Also, TV watchers and newspaper readers alike valued the local coverage, but internet users did not.

Newspaper readers said:

“(Newspapers are) more in-depth. More reporters and newspaper editorials.”
“Better explanation of the candidates and what they stand for.”
“Like the insert of the proposals and candidates, the background info, statements about personal info.”
“More in-depth analysis of candidates’ positions.”

Internet users described the richness of content, the variety of sources, the wealth of information, and the different points of view. And they also highlighted something they could avoid: commercials:

“I can go to a variety of sources inside the U.S. and outside the country.”
“Can hit related links to see if I missed anything.”

“It gives more information.”
“Get a variety of news.”
“Number of different sources.”
“There’s no commercials.”
“Can go to different news sites and access to blogs.”

For TV viewers on the other hand, respondents gave contradictory messages; they valued either depth of content or consolidation of content, suggesting they may be watching different TV networks and programs. Those who appreciated the quick take on political information said:

“You can flip stations and get multiple opinions at your fingertips.”
“It’s quick and precise.”
“It consolidates the information it would take me a while to read.”
“Given to you in a faster format.”

Those who appreciated the depth or breadth of information said:

“They have representatives to discuss issues that aren’t presented in the newspapers.”
“They just cover more. Endless.”
“They give a lot of detail into the subjects.”

Fish or Fowl: What Distinguishes TV, Newspapers, and the Internet.

Each of the media types, however, has special appeals for its aficionados.

Reading newspapers for election news: a comfortable, informative experience.

Newspaper readers described the pleasant experience of reading the paper the way train buffs or ocean cruisers say that getting there is half the fun. Reading the paper was about a slower pace; a chance to reflect, reread, and digest; and a tactile sense of the paper and ink. Here are some of their comments about the experience of getting political news from the papers:

“I like to sit down in a comfortable chair and read the paper.”
“The ability to go back and reread something if I have questions about it.”
“Slower to go over things.”
“Holding the newspaper.”
“I can read it as many times as I want to get the full understanding.”
“I just enjoy reading.”
“You can sit down and read and the information can sink in.”
“I can take my time and come to my own conclusion.”

These comments echoed findings from a more general news consumption survey conducted in the spring of 2006 by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. (<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=1064>) In response to whether newspaper readers found the activity relaxing, 57% said yes, compared with 41% of TV watchers, and 33% of internet users.

Newspaper readers appreciated the depth and perspective that newspapers can bring to news about campaigns and elections. They liked the graphs, charts, position statements and statistics. Many readers valued these assets as the means to the end of making informed decisions.

“I like the statistics.”
“It’s not someone on television telling me what to do.”
“You can read it at your own leisure to make an informed decision.”
“I can take my time and come to my own conclusion.”

Watching TV for election news: easy, personal, but often hateful.

A good number of TV watchers admitted to being lazy, and many more said they liked getting their campaign and election news from television because it was easy. They don't have to work for their news, but can just turn on the TV and have it delivered to them. Here are some of their comments about why they like watching TV for political news:

"I guess it's just easier to watch it."
"Easy. I don't have to go looking for it."
"I'm lazy. And they have opinions."
"They tell you and you don't have to read it."
"I don't like to read."

TV brought out people's strongest reactions and even contradictions. Although TV was where these respondents got most of their election news, that didn't always mean they liked it. Many said TV was simply their default mode, while others voiced outright hostility toward television election news. Negative words appeared often and were strong: Mudslinging, slander, disgusted, despise, brainwash, lousy. Here are some typical comments in this spirit:

"I don't like it. TV news is all smear campaigns."
"I just hate it."
"I pretty much hate all of it actually."
"I don't like it; I wish there were more debating between candidates about issues."
"I get very tired and disgusted when they have the ads for [the candidates]."

While political news consumers comments about TV echoed essential findings from the earlier Pew Research Center survey -- that TV watching was easy and convenient, and that the content was up to date and concisely delivered -- one new attribute emerged in this political news consumption survey. Many viewers appreciated the *personal connection* with the candidates that TV offers. They described getting a sense of the candidates' humanity from seeing them, hearing them, watching their body language and personal reactions. And they particularly enjoyed the TV event that showed this off the best: the debates. Here are some comments:

"Actually get to see the physical person and see them interacting with the community."
"I can see their personalities, conversations, how they relate to the crowd, how they react under pressure."
"Opportunity to hear the candidates and different newscasters give their opinions about various candidates. You feel personality from the character you watch on television."
"I can actually see the candidates and facial expressions."
"One local NBC station had a debate every night."
"I like to see live people; especially debates."

A number of older people described, almost poignantly, the advantages of TV for them.

"It's alright, and my eyesight is bad, so I enjoy TV better."
"I think you absorb television. At least I do, since I'm elderly and need help reading."
"I can't see that well to read anything."

Using the internet for election news: Control, control, control.

Commenting on why they prefer to go online for their campaign and election news, internet users' dominant message was about control. They valued control over all the features of internet use that make it convenient: time, place, speed, and access to content of their choosing.

Here are some of the ways internet users described what they liked about the internet's convenience factors.

"You can find what you want when you want."
"I get to choose my sources."

"I can do a search."
"I can go wherever I want."
"Instant access."
"Easier to access. Update quicker."
"I like being the editor of information."

Two of these convenience factors particularly profit users with a fast internet connection, the benefits of which are now commonly accepted to be not only speed, but having a connection that is "always on". The Pew Internet Project report noted that internet users with broadband connections were more likely to have gotten most of their election news from the internet than those with dial-up connections. The report estimated that about one third of the increase in use of the internet as an election news source over the last 4 years was due directly to growth in broadband adoption. Many internet users offered comments that gave voice to the numbers:

"I'm always on the computer."
"The internet is there when you need it."
"Information on demand."
"On it all day."
"More readily available."

Comments once again resonated with data from the Pew Research Center general news consumption survey. Asked what sets the internet apart from other media for news consumption, 60% of internet news consumers pointed to usability factors -- accessibility, convenience, easy to navigate, etc. This percentage was much higher than the 46% of newspaper readers who said the same for newspapers, or the 37% of TV news viewers who said the same about TV.

Immeasurable online content

An ongoing and incomparable online phenomenon is the stupendous increase in the content accessible on the worldwide web. Many internet users acknowledged this as a reason for turning to the Web for political news coverage. According to the Pew Internet Project report, 60% of internet news consumers went to the mainstream media sources of major papers or broadcast institutions. However, a "long tail"² of other information sources is unique to the internet, and users are discovering it. The report notes that of those who said they got most of their political news online, 20% said they visit online journals or blogs; 20% visit international news organizations; 28% visit state or local government websites, 24% visit issue-oriented websites; 19% visit news satire websites; and 10% visit alternative news sites.

Here are typical comments on the variety of information available:

"Sites I want to look at."
"Selectivity."
"Unfiltered; I can go directly to the source."
"Myspace blogs."
"Consolidated reports and link pages."
"Interactive; I can follow up on something I've read or that has caught my eye."
"You get a little bit of everything. As much detail as you want."

What People Did *NOT* Say

Among all the 1,750 comments, some conspicuous gaps may be noted. Here, for example, are some reasons why people might choose TV or newspapers or the internet for political coverage that we did *not* hear. No one said:

They seek information that supports their own side or beliefs.
They like commercials or advertisements.
They appreciate negative information.

And here are a few complaints we also did *not* hear:

There is a shortage of information.
There is a shortage of opinion.
Information is slow to reach them.

¹ Percentages exceed 100, as some people gave more than one answer.

² See http://longtail.typepad.com/the_long_tail/