

# Media Channel Effectiveness and Trust

Edward Paul Johnson<sup>1</sup>, Dan Williams<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Western Wats, 701 E. Timpanogos Parkway, Orem, UT, 84097

## Abstract

The advent of social media creates an alternative channel for political messaging. Social media can take many forms including blogs, Facebook messages, or even U-Tube postings of videos/political ads. These social media sources do not rely on journalistic credentials to establish credibility. Instead, they tend to rely on a personal connection with the target audience. However, it is uncertain how effective political messaging is through these social media channels as compared to traditional media channels. We conducted a political telephone survey with an RDD sample of the US voting population to compare these media channels.

This paper compares traditional media and social media in terms of reach, usage, and trust. Lastly, it does a head to head comparison in a randomized experiment of those who use both social and traditional media to see which channel is more effective at swaying public opinion. We conclude that traditional media reaches more people both in terms of reach and frequency of contact. Also, the level of trust coming from traditional media sources is higher than social media, but it is very close between the consumers of social media. Lastly, we show how the traditional media has a small edge in the head to head comparison, but the social media does have important sway in the population. This research opens the door to more involved research including the following areas: specific campaign ads, cost effectiveness, and interaction effects of blending the media sources.

**Key Words:** social media, political messaging

## 1. Introduction

Media influence on politics has been examined thoroughly for many years (McCombs, 1972). Until recently media channels were dominated by professional journalists, so most of these studies have used media from professional journalists. Social media distribution and usage has provided an alternative channel for message distribution that is commonly used in marketing products (Gillin, 2007). Although political messaging was slower to adopt social media tools, social media is quickly becoming an important tool for campaigns and messaging. Barack Obama effectively used these tools to mobilize support and change public opinion in his landslide 2008 presidential campaign victory (Edelman, 2009).

The social media channels differ significantly from traditional media channels. Traditional media channels normally communicate only in one direction (from the journalist to the public). Social media channels allow free flow of information from the source to the public, from the public back to the source, and from one member to another member of the public. Traditional media relies on credentials and journalistic integrity to lend strength to its arguments. Social media has no such credentials. The consumer of social media relies on personal connections with the media source or author. We want to

look at which of these two approaches generates more support and trust in a political setting.

## 2. Design

To measure the strength of social and traditional media channels, we performed a randomized message testing experiment in a national phone survey. The sample for the phone survey was generated using Random Digit Dialing techniques in both landline and cell phone frames. The sample was dialed from December 2009 to January 2010 from a domestic phone center in Arizona. A minimum of 5 attempts were made to contact each resident. The 607 completed surveys resulted in a 13% response rate and were balanced by quotas on age and gender to reflect the US population.

The questionnaire was approximately 10 minutes and consisted of five distinct batteries of questions (full questionnaire included in Appendix A). First, we obtained the political attitudes and general demographics of the respondent: voter history, party registration, ideology, age and gender. After basic information was collected, we asked about their media usage habits for the following eight channels:

### Traditional Media Channels

- Newspapers
- Television
- Radio
- Internet News sites

### Social Media Channels

- Facebook
- Twitter/Text Messages
- Blogs
- You-Tube

After we obtained usage by each media source, we asked attitudinal questions about their trust in the content (political opinions and facts) found in each of the sources they used at least once a week. We measured their stated trust on a typical 5 point Likert scale.

Lastly, we used the results of the trust battery to ask media push questions for those that consumed both social and traditional media sources. We started by identifying each respondent's most trusted traditional media channel. If two traditional media channels had equal trust ratings we randomly picked one. We used the same process to identify the most trusted social media channel. After establishing each respondent's most trusted social and traditional channels we randomly assigned each channel to a one of two positions on the health care bill being debated in Congress. One position was in support of the health care bill and the other position was opposed to the health care bill. We then presented both positions on the issue in a random order and asked the respondent if the statements changed their support of the health care bill. An example of the CATI instruction shown to the interviewer is shown in Figure 1. In this case, TV was the traditional media channel with the highest trust rating on the 5 point scale. It was randomly assigned to the pro-health care bill argument. Blogs were the most trusted social media channel, so it was assigned the anti-health care bill argument by default. The

pro-health care bill statement was randomly chosen to be the first statement read to the respondent. Both arguments were given equivalent strength and time, but any residual unbalance would have been evened out by the random assignment of the argument to a media channel and the random order being read to the respondent.

Let's say that you encountered the following two pieces of information: **a TV report on the news show you watch** stating that the new health care bill will ensure that health care is affordable to all Americans, will increase the quality of health care, and preserve your ability to choose to go to whomever you want for treatment and **a post or comment on a friend's blog** stating that the new health care bill is too expensive, will make the quality of health care decrease, and will limit your ability to choose your doctor.

How would this change your support of the new health care bill?

(q10:5)  Greatly Decrease my support of the new health care bill  
(q10:4)  Somewhat Decrease my support of the new health care bill  
(q10:3)  Have no Effect on my support of the new health care bill  
(q10:2)  Somewhat Increase my support of the new health care bill  
(q10:1)  Greatly Increase my support of the new health care bill

[Back](#) [Next](#)

During the survey, please do not use your browser's "Forward" and "Back" buttons. To move through the survey, use the "Back" and "Next" buttons at the bottom of each page. At the end of the survey click the "Done" button to submit your survey.

**Figure 1:** Example of the health care head to head comparison test between the most trusted social and traditional media channels.

After this question, respondents were asked a similar question on the topic of Obama's effectiveness as President. An example of the CATI instruction for this second media push question is shown in Figure 2. Note the media channel that got the pro-health care bill received the anti-Obama statement and vice versa. If the respondent's support either increased or decreased, they were considered "pushed" by the media that supported the statement in that direction. Thus if a respondent selected "Greatly Decrease my support of President Obama" and the TV report was assigned to the anti-Obama position, they were considered to be pushed more by TV and thus traditional media sources.

Let's say that you encountered the following two pieces of information: **a post or comment on a friend's blog** stating President Obama is an effective leader and is leading the country in the right direction and **a TV report on the news show you watch** stating President Obama is not an effective leader and is leading the country in the wrong direction.

How would this change your support of President Obama?

(q11:5)  Greatly Decrease my support of President Obama  
(q11:4)  Somewhat Decrease my support of President Obama  
(q11:3)  Have no Effect on my support of President Obama  
(q11:2)  Somewhat Increase my support of President Obama  
(q11:1)  Greatly Increase my support of President Obama

[Back](#) [Next](#)

During the survey, please do not use your browser's "Forward" and "Back" buttons. To move through the survey, use the "Back" and "Next" buttons at the bottom of each page. At the end of the survey click the "Done" button to submit your survey.

**Figure 2:** Example of the Obama head to head comparison test between the most trusted social and traditional media channels.

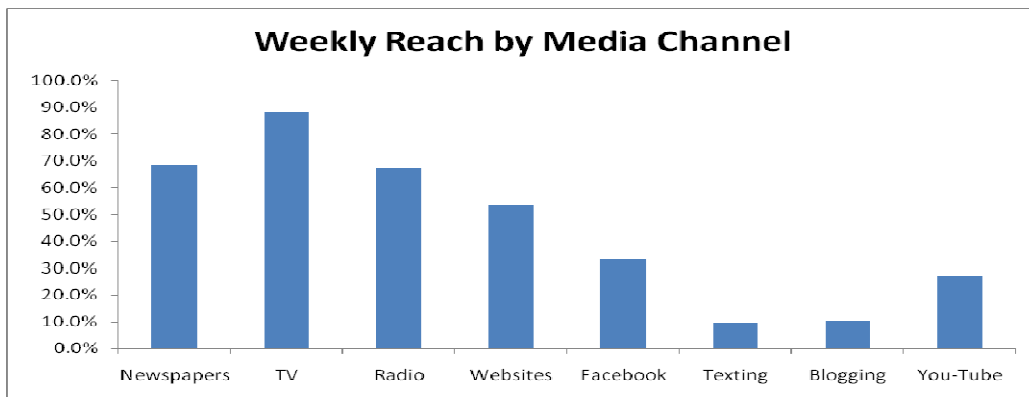
When looking at media push we wanted to analyze the push by the strength of the party relationship. We divided the sample into three groups: strong Republicans, strong Democrats, and Independents. Strong Republicans were defined with three criteria: identify with the Republican Party somewhat strongly or very strongly, did not vote for a Democratic candidate in the past House, Senate, or Presidential elections, consider themselves somewhat or strongly conservative in ideology. Strong Democrats were defined similarly: somewhat or very strong party identification, haven't voted for a Republican, and somewhat or strongly liberal in ideology. Those that were not defined as strong Republican or strong Democrat were considered Independents.

The data was then weighted to adjust for age, ethnicity, gender, income, and region to match the US census estimate (mean = 1, standard deviation=.722) using the standard iterative proportional fitting algorithm. The results were then compared to answer the following questions:

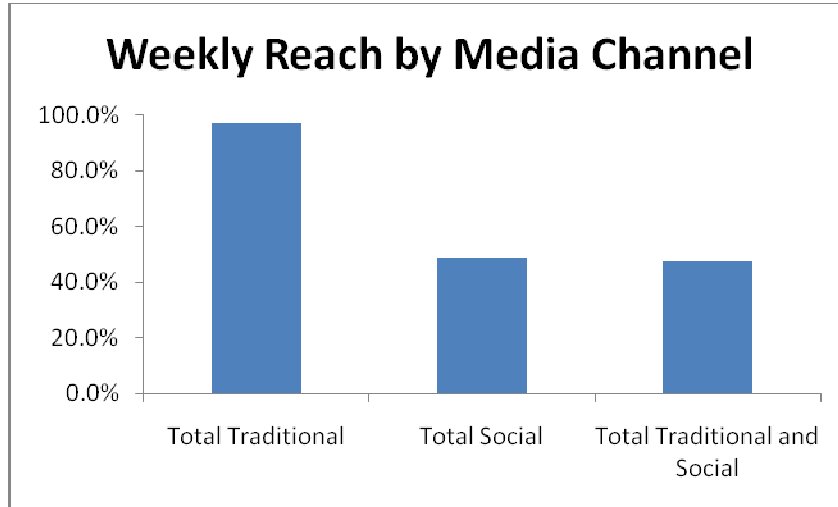
- 1) How much more reach do traditional media channels have?
- 2) How often is each of the media channels used?
- 3) Which media channels are trusted more by consumers for political information?
- 4) Do traditional or social media channels have a stronger media push?
- 5) Are those with a strong party affiliation easier to push?

### 3. Results

Figure 3 shows the total percentage of the sample that uses each media channel on at least a weekly basis. Not surprisingly the TV is the most used media channel with almost 90% of the sample indicating they watch TV on a weekly basis. Newspapers and Radio had the next furthest reach. We anticipate that reach of TV, Newspaper and Radio is higher because they do not require internet access, although we cannot confirm that suspicion as internet access was not asked. Traditional online news websites have greater reach than Facebook, the social media with the greatest reach. Finally texting and blogging were the media channels with the smallest reach. Figure 4 shows media usage in aggregate over the 4 traditional and 4 social media channels. Overall traditional media will reach over 95% of the US population, while social media will only reach only reach about 50% of the population. Furthermore, almost everyone reached by social media can also be effectively reached though traditional media.

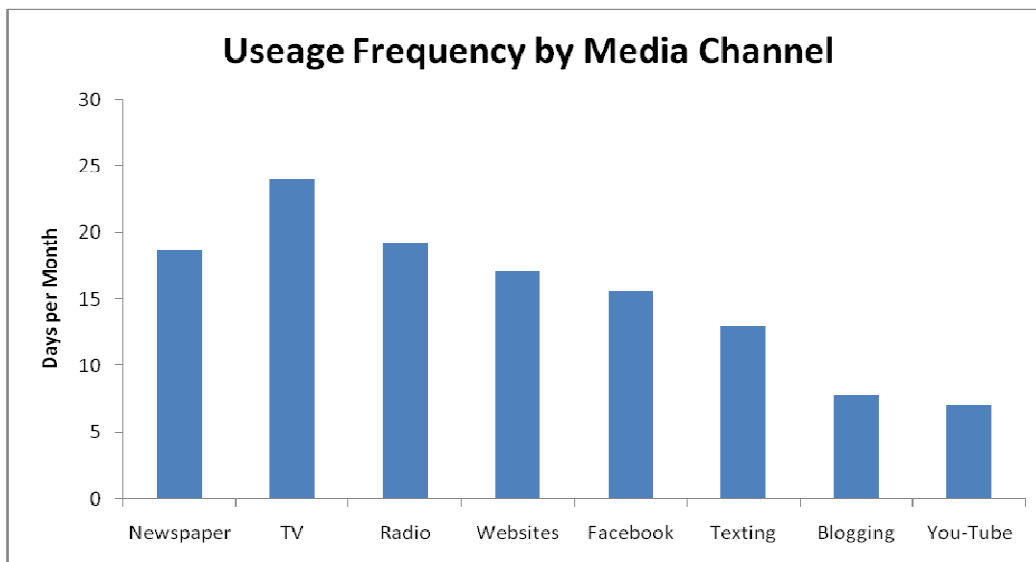


**Figure 3:** Percentage of media channel reach in the US voting population.



**Figure 4:** Percentage of traditional and social media reach in aggregate across all channels tested.

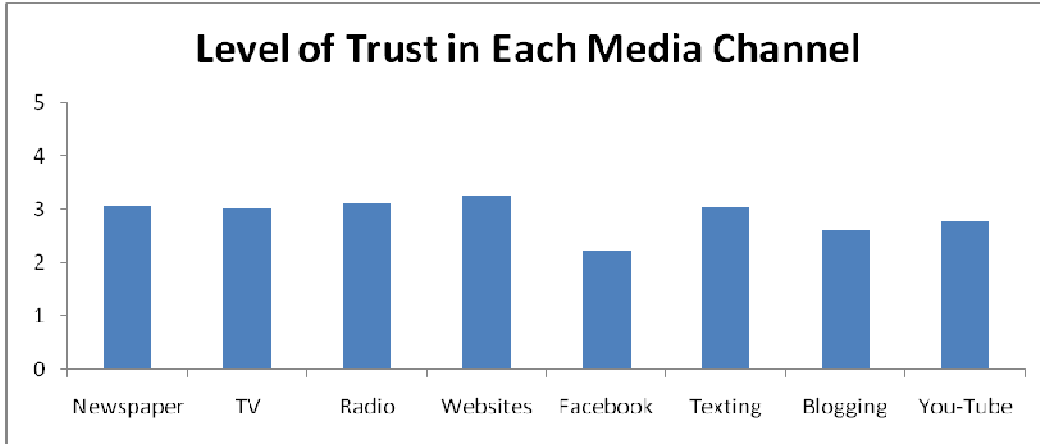
Traditional Media not only reaches more people, but people also use it more often. Figure 5 shows the average number of days per month each media channel was used. The results track closely with the amount of reach each media channel had with the following exception: people tend to text or blog more frequently on average than watch You-Tube even though You-Tube has the greater reach. Ultimately, more people use traditional sources of media and they use them more often than social media channels. It is important to note that while a media channel may be used frequently, that doesn't mean it is more trusted.



**Figure 5:** Average frequency of use among those that the media channel reaches by media channel.

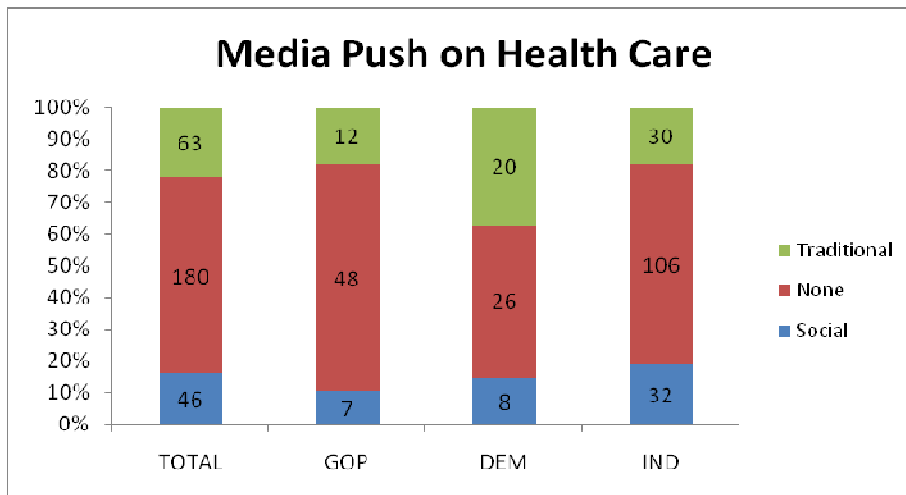
While traditional media channels have an overwhelming edge in reach and saturation (frequency of use), it only has a slight edge in trust. Figure 6 compares the average trust in the “political opinion and facts” that come from each of the media sources on a scale from 1-5. It is interesting to note that although the test is slightly higher in the traditional

sources of media, the social media sources have very comparable trust levels. Facebook had the lowest trust level, but even online news sites, the most trusted source, were only 1 point higher. Also, no media channel averaged over a 3.5 on a 5 point scale in trust. Apparently the public’s well documented skepticism of media extends to social media in approximately the same degree. These results are also supported by the media push results.

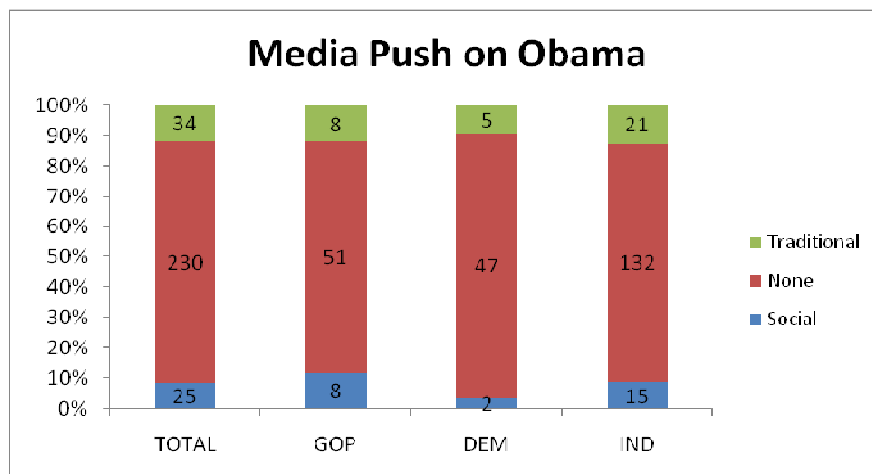


**Figure 6:** Average trust rating on a 5 point scale by media channel.

While the Media Push section yielded similar results with the trust section, it did not vary much by party affiliation strength. Figures 7 and 8 show the results of the Media push question on the health care bill and Obama’s effectiveness as President. Note that the sample size of these questions is reduced to 289 because these questions were only asked of the respondents that consumed both traditional and social media at least on a weekly basis. In each question the traditional media source had a small edge on social media. It is also interesting to note that the subject matter makes a big difference, opinions about the health care bill showed more mobility than opinions on Obama. The only significant difference in push by party is that the Strong Democrats were more likely to be pushed by traditional media on the health care bill than Independents or Strong Republicans ( $p < .05$ ).



**Figure 7:** Percentage of traditional and social media push on health care by party affiliation.



**Figure 8:** Percentage of traditional and social media push on Obama's effectiveness by party affiliation.

### 3. Conclusions

Currently traditional media impacts public opinion more than social media mostly because of its greater reach and exposure. Traditional media reaches close to 100% percent of the population while social media only reaches around 50% of the population. People also use traditional media more often than social media. While Facebook is used very often (on average every other day), every single traditional media source is used more often than Facebook. Traditional media had a slight edge in both trust and the media push; however, a significant portion of the population trusted and was pushed by social media. This could be a result of increased skepticism of traditional media channels and journalistic credentials.

This research brings up many other questions related to social and traditional media's impact on public opinion. The cost of traditional and social media campaigns should be considered when evaluating the cost effectiveness of a potential campaign. Also a professional ad campaign may have different results in trust for media channels when compared to our simulated ads of main points. Other political and social topics should be explored to see if social media wields more credibility on different topics. Lastly, we are observing social and traditional media sources being fused together. This is much more common on the web as news sites allow social commentary about their journal pieces. Also, blogs and other social forums will link to traditional media sources. This interaction and fusion of media sources merits future research.

### References

- Edelman, (2009). "The Social Pulpit Barack Obama's Social Media Toolkit." Whitepaper found at <http://www.edelman.com/image/insights/content/social%20pulpit%20-%20barack%20obamas%20social%20media%20toolkit%201.09.pdf>.
- Gillin, Paul (2007). *The New Influencers: A Marketer's Guide to the New Social Media*. Quill Driver Books: Sanger, CA.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D.L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, 176-187.