Web White & Blue 2000 Evaluation Summary

In a year where the outcome of the Presidential election was decided by a few hundred votes, and the balance of power in the U.S. Senate was determined by a similarly close margin, the question of what effect the Internet as a medium for political information and involvement had on the voting public is a pertinent one.

As an organization committed to realizing the potential of emerging communications and technology to improve people's lives, the Markle Foundation designed an online election project – Web White and Blue 2000 – to explore ways in which individuals' political experiences could be enhanced by the use of this new media. As a unique, non-partisan collaboration of 17 of the largest sites and news organizations on the Web, the political information and interactive experiences of Web White and Blue 2000 were made available to nearly 70 million people.

Designed to complement traditional televised debates, Web White and Blue 2000's *Rolling Cyber Debate*—active from October 1 through November 8, 2000—consisted of a daily exchange between the candidates on topics provided by the campaigns themselves and citizens via the Web White & Blue 2000 network. Also during the course of the campaign, Web White & Blue 2000 provided links to the *Best of the Best*, which summarized political news stories online.

The Web White & Blue 2000 evaluation is an important contribution to the study of how citizens use the Internet as a source of political information. Web White & Blue 2000 strove to use the power of new and emerging communication technologies to encourage active and informed public involvement in the political process. Because we are still at the beginning of the evolution of how the medium will ultimately impact our political discourse and experience, the necessity for rigorous evaluation is almost as important as the activity itself.

Below are a few interesting key findings from the evaluation report:

- After a five minute viewing of Web White & Blue 2000, 69 percent of new viewers expressed greater confidence in the quality of political information on the Internet.

- More than 70 percent of visitors looking for specific information were able to find it on the Web White and Blue 2000 network.

- Web White and Blue 2000 was viewed by the public as a credible source of political information.

- The Internet and political sites such as Web White and Blue 2000 are influencing voters' decisions and opinions. Approximately 50 percent of Web White & Blue 2000 visitors who participated in the lab experiments reported a change in how they viewed at least one of the presidential candidates.

- Tracking political Internet site traffic could be used in the future as another way to perform public opinion polls. For instance, as Election Day approached, those who viewed the *Question of the Day* on Web White & Blue 2000 focused their attention on the major parties and showed an increased interest in the Bush candidacy at the same time his public opinion poll numbers were rising.

Evaluation Goals and Components

Web White & Blue 2000, a project of the Markle Foundation, was a non-partisan consortium of 17 of the largest Internet and traditional news organizations that came together to highlight the potential of the Internet to expand citizen participation in our democracy. To better understand the effect of this collaboration and to build a strong foundation for future efforts, the Markle Foundation engaged in a multi-faceted evaluation of Web White & Blue 2000. The evaluation was conducted in order to find answers to the following questions:

- How did participation in Web White & Blue 2000 affect the charter sites?
- Did the Web White & Blue 2000 network affect the expectations or behaviors of those who used it?
- What issues do users and charter sites want Web White & Blue to explore in the future?

Answers to these important questions provide data critical to determining how to best serve the public interest while enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of our and the Web White & Blue network's future endeavors.

The evaluation consists of four main components:

- In-depth interviews with representatives of the charter sites
- Web White and Blue 2000 network usage statistics
- A voluntary user survey
- Internet-based interviews with a random sample of Americans that gauge the effect of particular Web sites

These components – when combined with in-depth analysis provided by key players in online media – help to shed light on Web White & Blue 2000's impact on the political landscape. This executive summary lays out the themes of the full evaluation and highlights a few of its findings.

Charter Site Interviews

Interviews with charter site participants illustrated a clear point: Among the many and varied civic initiatives to appear during the last election cycle, participation in Web White & Blue 2000 proved extremely beneficial for politicians, media partners and citizens at-large.

These interviews also suggested that the Web White & Blue 2000 network can continue to serve as a unique and valuable public affairs forum. One of the most critical components of the evaluation was the examination of Web White & Blue 2000 from the perspective of its 17 charter sites. Members of the Web White & Blue 2000 team interviewed representatives from 15 of the 17 Web White & Blue 2000 network charter sites, covering four main areas – *Working with Web White & Blue; Effect of the Partnership; Rolling Cyber Debate; and Best of the Best,* and *The Future.*

These interviews showed that the largest and most prestigious sites are interested in getting involved in civic forums that directly engage the public with the political process and that endevours like Web White and Blue 2000 make it possible for the Internet to be more than just a marketplace, but a forum for citizens to have an active role in the political process.

Usage Statistics

Mindshare Internet Campaigns, L.L.C. developed and maintained the Web White & Blue 2000 website, its content syndication system and its *Rolling Cyber Debate* technology platform. They also tracked patterns of usage to the site. The usage patterns showed the following time and linkage trends:

- From its launch on June 28, 2000 through November 8, 2000, www.webwhiteblue.org received a grand total of 7,518,608 page views.

- Between October 1, 2000 and November 8, 2000, the *Rolling Cyber Debate* received 737,944 page views.
  - Of these, 43 percent (314,833) were through the 17 Charter sites.

- The remaining 57 percent (423,161) were through the Web White & Blue 2000 site, in part because American Online linked to the site for the first ten days of the debate.

- The "Best of the Best" feature received 3,919,214 page views.
    - Of these, 56 percent (2,197,226) were before the launch of the *Rolling Cyber Debate*, when the "Best of the Best" was on the Web White & Blue 2000 homepage.

Usage statistics provide valuable information about the frequency and timing of traffic to various destinations within the Web White & Blue 2000 network. According to a recent survey, the percentage of respondents who said that the Internet was their primary source of information increased 14 percent between 1998 and 2000. During this time, the percentage of respondents citing newspapers as their primary source of information has decreased from 25 percent to just below 11 percent. This shows that the web is steadily providing more information to the American public.

Voluntary User Survey

A voluntary survey was added to the Web White & Blue 2000 site in October 2000. While asking users general questions about their online habits, the survey also asked whether they viewed the Web White & Blue 2000 site as informative, useful and trustworthy. In less than one month, more than 3000 visitors responded, showing that more than 70% of Web White & Blue 2000 users were able to find answers to their specific questions when visiting the site.

The general consensus from the survey is that Web White & Blue 2000 provided a useful public service in a quick, easy and efficient manner.

Internet-based Interview Headlines

As Election Day approached, the majority of those who viewed the "Question of the Day" focused on the major party candidates, with an increasing amount of interest shown in the Bush campaign.

To better understand the Web White and Blue 2000 network's effect on users, we looked for ways to compare data collected in the voluntary user survey with data on how the network affected the people who were not inclined to fill out such a survey. Internet-based interviews became a critical part of this evaluation.

Between October 13 and November 6, 2000, we interviewed a random and diverse sample of 1,140 American users. Participants were presented with a seemingly standard interview about their web usage. Then, the interview was interrupted and subjects were sent to one or two sites of our choosing for five minutes each. Some were member sites

of the Web White & Blue 2000 network; others were not. After five minutes, respondents answered questions about what they saw. One week later, a follow-up interview was conducted.

The Web White & Blue 2000 Evaluation Summary showed that tracking political Internet site traffic could be another way to perform public opinion polls and increase the public's active involvement in elections.

Laboratory Experiment Headlines

Laboratory experiments evaluated the effects of the Web White & Blue 2000 network on current and potential users in a range of viewing environments. Because people who view one political web site can be more likely to view many others of the same kind, it can be difficult to determine whether a user's exposure to *a particular* site can cause them to change their beliefs or behavior. As a result, in our study, subjects were asked to restrict their attention to one site; others were asked to view two or more sites. By varying subjects' exposure and access to Web White and Blue 2000 and other sites, we were able to obtain a much clearer view of the impact of the Web White and Blue 2000 network on users.

Approximately 50 percent of the subjects reported a change in how they viewed at least one of the candidates, with an even split in whether these revised evaluations were positive or negative. These findings suggest just how powerful Internet sites can be and how their power will continue to grow as more people turn to the Web for news and information.

Implications

It has been argued that the Internet did not have an important impact on the 2000 elections and has only limited potential for affecting politics in the immediate future. These debates are hindered by the fact that systematic data about its effects is difficult to come by. Hit counts reveal who visited a Web site, but they provide little credible evidence about the extent to which a web page or site changes users' behaviors or beliefs. It is our hope that the Web White and Blue 2000 evaluation can begin to reduce doubts about the Internet's political impact by documenting and analyzing how an innovative Internet entity affected its contributors and its real and potential user base, and that it will lead to more experimentation, applications and use as a result.