

Political Traffic

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Given the magnitude of traffic flowing to other categories of online content, traffic to political sites is small enough to be a rounding error. As we have seen, some have hoped that this might be a blessing---that within sites focused on politics traffic would be concentrated enough to filter out the best content, but diffuse enough to empower ordinary citizens.

Such hopes find little support in this data; unlike some have predicted, the small volume of political traffic does not mean that traffic is equitably distributed. This figure (again, a draft illustration from the book) maps traffic among political Websites. Hitwise defines political Websites as those "which belong to particular political parties or organizations, plus sites that are devoted to expressing views on local or international political issues." Here the graph includes the top 50 political Websites, a group that collectively receives 60 percent of the category's traffic. For political sites, we are concerned not just with the divide between the popular sites and the also-rans, but also with the relative audience share among the most popular outlets. The most popular political sites listed include all of the expected names: online forums such as FreeRepublic.com, prominent advocacy groups such as MoveOn.org, and of course popular political blogs such as DailyKos or Instapundit. Chapter 6 looks at blogs and blog rankings more closely; the ranking of top political blogs by traffic in Hitwise's account is nearly identical to rankings of blogs based on either the number of inbound links they receive, or other metrics of traffic.

Click on the map for a full-size version; click the link below to read more about the figure.

Discussion of the online public sphere have imagined that political blogs, advocacy organizations, and other noncommercial outlets would challenge the monopoly that commercial media have had on public discourse. Judging by traffic, this challenge does not seem to be particularly strong. As the above graphics have illustrated, news and media sites still receive 30 times as many visits as political websites do. Political readership is large by the standards of traditional opinion journals, such as *The Nation* or *The New Republic* or *The National Review*, all of which are minor print publications. Yet political sites remain a small niche amid the larger Web.

Chapter 2 suggested that liberals were more active Web users than conservatives, and this data is consistent with that conclusion. Overall, visits to liberal sites outpace visits to conservative sites by a margin of 2 to 1.

Political sites do demonstrate strong liberal and conservative factions. Liberal-leaning sites are in blue; conservative sites are in red. Ostensibly nonpartisan sites are in gray. Political sites clearly share more traffic with their ideological compatriots, and this data provides some support for claims of online echo chambers (e.g. Cass Sunstein). All told, only 2.6 percent of traffic from one Top 50 political Website to another crosses ideological lines. Still, 12 of the 50 sites receive or send a significant portion of their traffic across the ideological divide.