Greetings,

Back in March-June of 2005, you participated in a study about media use, identity, and political attitudes and knowledge, and you gave us your e-mail address so that we could send you a summary of the results. We’re sorry about the long delay writing this up! Our hoped for summary time is 6-8 weeks after data collection, so we’re very sorry about the 6 month delay here! It was caused sequentially by illness, travel, work, and problems with the coding...

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: Identity, Media Use & Political Attitudes and Knowledge Working paper, 24/1/06. This paper has not been peer reviewed. Please do not copy or cite without author's permission. (Under “peer review”, other researchers get a chance to scrutinize the methods and analyses and criticise them, preceding publication of the data as an official result. This process usually takes a couple of years, in my field, during which time the data should be seen as preliminary. This shouldn’t affect your personal discussions of the results, or internal group / organization discussions, but just means that the data should not be published officially till verified by other researchers.)

THIRTY-SECOND VERSION
* People who are active in the community are more knowledgeable about current affairs.
* Politically knowledgeable and active people differ in their media use in being more reliant for news on public broadcasting sources and less on commercial media.
* Government and opposition party supporters were equally knowledgeable and active overall.
* But when looking at the specific issue of views on the war in Iraq, war opponents were more knowledgeable about foreign affairs.

WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
We wanted to look at patterns of media use and political actions and attitudes. This is a relatively new area of research in our lab & we were pointed to it by some of the comments in an earlier activists’ study. Respondents felt strongly that alternative media were important in informing attitudes & political action, and motivating people to get involved with the community.

We found that the media literature typically looks at the relationship of media use to political knowledge and activism, so we wanted to explore these effects and gather some info about media sources relevant to Australians. In our first study (online at http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/wl1203_1.pdf), we found that politically active people are more knowledgeable, as you would expect, and that politically knowledgeable and active people differed in their media use in being more net-reliant for news and in choosing public broadcasting sources. This is in line with activists’ intuitions, but the small and relatively homogeneous sample we had (mostly activist peaceniks) prevented us from being certain about the findings. We decided to try again. We got a much better sample this time (as you will see below).

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
From March 25 - June 5, 2005, 221 people completed the study online through our web site. The participants were a convenience sample comprised of students and people who are active in the community. This is a good sample for our research questions in terms of the numbers (more is better!). But although ages ranged from 17 to 78, the median was 21 (i.e., the respondents were disproportionately young). Most participants were female (62%), ethnically European (92%), Christian (63%), heterosexual (94%), had completed high school (52%) and were Australian (97%) and specifically Queenslanders (~80%). Politically, 34% of respondents affiliated with the Coalition, 23% with no party, and 42% with an opposition party (22% Labor, 16% Green, 6% other). Respondents identified strongly (above the midpoint) with their nationality,
WHAT WE FOUND

1. COMMUNITY ACTIVISM. 38% of respondents reported they were not active in the community, while 62% reported actively supporting one or more cause or organization. These included a tremendous diversity of political, religious, sports, and professional groups as well as issue-based organizations. When asked about specific actions, 65% had donated money, 56% had attended a meeting, 46% signed a petition, 45% volunteered time, and 11% attended a rally, and 13% listed other activities (giving blood, visiting asylum seekers in detention, church activities, etc.). So respondents were pretty active (59% identified above the midpoint as a community activist), and in general intended to be active in future.

2. POLITICAL ATTITUDES. (1) We asked about current and past war views. Respondents reported that they had mostly opposed the war in the past and continued to do so (70%). This was true for opposition party affiliates (90%) and people who were politically unaffiliated (~75%), while coalition voters indicated they had supported the war in the past (52%) and continued to do so (59%). Most people saw the war as harmful to themselves (70%), Australia (66%), Iraq (59%) and even the US (54%) but indicated that what caused their views of the war were the consequences for Iraq. (2) We also asked about politics in general. A minority of respondents were turned off politics (26%), and a minority were interested and positive (39%), and many respondents were neutral or ambivalent (35%). (3) When asked about different levels of politics, most people responded that they spoke to friends infrequently about local politics, but weekly or more often about state, national, and international politics.

3. MEDIA USE. We asked about how many hours people listened to the radio, read print magazines and papers, watched TV, and surfed per day. We also asked people to list their sources for political news as well as the frequency that they accessed political news in each medium. Finally we asked people to rate the value of their news sources in each medium.

People watched 2 hours of TV / day, on average. Most watched TV news every day (33%) or nearly every day (28%), with the most common sources of political news reported being the ABC (68%), SBS (38%), Channel 9 (36%), and Channel 7 (31%), and Channel 10 (27%). Respondents listened to 1 hour of radio/day, on average, and listened to radio news at least. The most common radio sources again included the ABC - about 49% mentioned Radio National, ABC or Triple J. Respondents spent about 1 hour on average reading print media / day, with 20% reading daily news and 19% reading news nearly every day. Geographically localized newspapers predominated as print sources, including THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD (mentioned by 7%), and THE COURIER MAIL (36%), as well as THE AUSTRALIAN (35%), and THE FINANCIAL REVIEW (7%). Finally, people spent about 2 hours surfing per day, with 28% accessing news every day or nearly, 18% weekly, and 49% infrequently. Listed news sources on the net were diverse, but the most common were Nine MSN (mentioned by 19%), the ABC web site (11%), and various web sites for print newspapers. Overall people rated their TV and print news as more useful (5/7) than their radio and net news (4/7).

3. POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE. Both in self-ratings and in our quiz, participants knew more about Australian politics and less about foreign affairs. On the quiz, correct answers were higher for Australia (86%) and the US (75%) than the UN (34%), and Iraq (26%). For example, 96% could identify the prime minister of Australia and 94% could identify the president of the US, but only 41% knew the secretary-general of the UN and 1% the Prime Minister or president of Iraq. There is a list of the questions and answers and scoring online at [http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/05polknow.pdf](http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/05polknow.pdf).

age, and gender; were neutral about their religious and political affiliation; and identified weakly (below the midpoint) with their ethnic group and sexual orientation.
4. THE INTER-RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THESE VARIABLES. In our data we found (as usual in the literature) that more knowledgeable and activist respondents were more interested in politics. Unaffiliated voters were less knowledgeable and active than Coalition and Opposition supporters, but these did not differ from each other in knowledge or community activity. This shows that we succeeded in recruiting educated and active people from across the political spectrum, which was one of our goals.

Looking at views on the war in Iraq, war opponents and supporters were equally knowledgeable about Australia, but opponents were more knowledgeable about Iraq, the US, and the UN. No consistent demographic differences emerged for ethnicity, religion, etc., except that more educated people were more knowledgeable and active.

Another research question is whether particular forms of media are associated with different levels of knowledge, attitudes, and action. For example, some past research has found that print media readers are better informed than TV watchers, and our own past study found that net-readers were most knowledgeable and active. But we didn’t find that type of media was important in the present data. Overall, time watching TV, listening to the radio, surfing the net and reading the paper were all unrelated to political knowledge, unless people reported specifically that they were accessing news frequently. But each news source was similarly effective.

We then looked at the difference between commercial and non-commercial media users within TV, radio, etc.. People who reported they got their news from commercial TV, radio, and net sites were less knowledgeable in every domain, and less active, than those who used public broadcasting sources. Commercial TV and commercial net media users were also more likely to be war supporters. Almost all papers listed were commercial, but we did look at national origin and found (as you would expect) that those reading foreign papers were more knowledgeable about the US, the UN, and Iraq than those who only read Australian papers. Within these categories, no significant differences were observed among those who cited different newspapers, stations, and sites: These sources were too diverse for the sample to measure.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The present study suggests that politically active people are more knowledgeable, as we expected. Politically knowledgeable and active people differ in their media use in being more reliant for news on public broadcasting sources. Use of commercial media sources was associated with less knowledge in every domain and less community engagement and activism.

Government and opposition voters were equally knowledgeable and active overall. But when looking at the specific issue of views on the war in Iraq, war opponents were found to be more knowledgeable about foreign affairs.

It’s important to realize though that when you take a snapshot of people’s views and behaviour at any moment in time, you can’t really tease apart cause and effect. For example, does using commercial media reduce your engagement with the community, or does doing community work expose you to non-commercial media sources? Do public broadcasting media give people more knowledge, or do educated, knowledgeable people choose non-commercial media for other reasons of culture or fashion?

To answer this question, we tried to collect data a few weeks later so that we could exploit a “longitudinal design” and look at change over time. But we managed to retain and match data for only 10% of respondents for the second wave, despite some new respondents. Moreover, our continuing respondents suffered from a problem of missing data because (we think) the questions about current issues were too difficult for people.

We found some of the same relationships in the new data. Specifically, knowledgeable people were more active, and those reliant on commercial media were less knowledgeable and less active. But we were not able to actually address the interesting question of whether media usage predicts later knowledge and attitudes, or knowledge and attitudes predict later media usage, or both!
So we need to continue our work in the area. We will be looking to run a third study in late 2006 or early 2007, where we recruit a group of at least 100 active community members who are willing to fill out two or more questionnaires! We also have to reformulate the second questionnaire so it is easier, in the hopes that people will fill it all in.

Another finding to follow up on is the one that commercial media news usage was associated with support for the war in Iraq as well as less information about foreign affairs. One possibility is that the alternative media are more informative and more left-wing than commercial media, which seems plausible. But others have argued that commercial media are not so much right- or left-wing in their views, but simplistic and conservative in the sense of favouring the status quo. If alternative media promote knowledge and dissenting opinions across a range of topics, it could be that on any issues where people oppose the status quo, we will find that opponents are better-informed and more likely to be accessing public broadcasting. So for example opponents of trade barriers might be more knowledgeable and access alternative media, while those who access commercial media are less informed on the issue and more supportive of Australian protectionism. We will accordingly try to address a broader range of issues next time, compared to only the war attitudes studied in the present data.

THANKS AGAIN....

So that's a description of what we found in this study: if you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for participating!

I should say that I’m happy to come and speak to any of the organisation who participated in the survey to discuss these results or my other research, and to talk about the implications for promoting an informed and engaged citizenry.

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