Greetings,

Back in May/June of 2003, 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!

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: Identity, Media Use & Attitudes and Knowledge re the War
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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 peace activists’ study. Respondents felt strongly that alternative media were important in informing pro-peace attitudes & activism. 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.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

From May 20 – June 30, 2003 (i.e., after the semester break at UQ and the end of the 1st phase of fighting in Iraq), 45 people completed the study. The participants were a convenience sample comprised of a handful of students and a larger group of peace activists. This is actually too small a sample for our research questions; we’re going to try running the study again this year so that we can get a broader representation of committed right-wing and uncommitted left-wing respondents. But we went ahead and looked at the results anyways.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. MEASURES OF IDENTITY. We had measures of identity for nationality, political party, gender, age, religion, and ethnicity. In each case, respondents self-identified and then rated the similarity they felt to members who had the same identity as well as the importance of the identity in determining their values and in their every day life. In the final sample, ages ranged from 17 to 75 with a median of 34. Most participants were female (65%), ethnically European (96%), non-religious (51%), and Australian (91%). Politically, respondents were disproportionately Green-affiliated (49%), with 13% Democrat, 9% ALP, 4% Liberal, and 16% unaffiliated or other. Respondents identified strongly (above the midpoint) with their political affiliation; were neutral about their age, gender, and religious affiliation; and identified weakly (below the midpoint) with their ethnic group and the Australian identity.

2. 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 (29%) or nearly every day (29%), with the most common sources of political news being the ABC (69%), SBS (51%), and Fox 10 (13%). Respondents listened to 1.5 hours of radio/day. Most listened to radio news every day (24%) or nearly every day (22%), primarily on ABC - 42% mentioned Radio National, 27% ABC Classic FM, and 16% JJJ. Respondents spent about 45 minutes on average reading print media / day, with 20% reading daily news and 18% reading news nearly every day. Geographically localized newspapers predominated as print sources, including THE AGE (mentioned by 29%), THE AUSTRALIAN (20%), and THE COURIER MAIL (13%). Finally, people spent about 2.4 hours surfing per day, with 22% accessing news every day and 22% nearly every day. Listed news sources on the net were diverse, but the three most common were Nine MSN (mentioned by
16%), various e-lists (9%), and THE AGE online (9%). Over all people rated their net news as more useful (5/7) than their tv news (4/7) with the print and radio news intermediate.

3. POLITICAL ATTITUDES, ACTIONS, AND KNOWLEDGE. We had measures of war attitudes, activism (past behaviour and intentions), and political knowledge regarding Australia, the US, Iraq, and the UN. Virtually everyone in the sample (97%) opposed the war – again, this was a problem for us re representativeness! Most (86%) identified as activists, and in the past month [ie, ~May 2003], 93% had engaged in some form of pro-peace political behaviour. Most of the sample intended to engage in more activism in the next month. We didn’t standardize the questions’ difficulty beforehand, but respondents knew more about Australian and the US than the UN, and least about Iraq. For example, 96% could identify the prime minister of Australia and 93% could identify the president of the US, but only 60% could identify the former president of Iraq and 53% the secretary-general of the UN. There is a list of the questions and answers scored as correct online at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/03polknow.pdf.

4. RELATIONSHIP AMONG THESE VARIABLES. Because most of the sample opposed the war and were activists, we couldn’t actually use the data to get a sense of what knowledge or media use is associated with war support or passive opposition. Moreover, few of our respondents used commercial news sources, so we weren’t able to compare commercial and alternative media users very well.

Having said that, in our data we do find (as usual in the literature) that more activist and politically identified respondents were more knowledgeable. No consistent demographic differences emerged. Time watching TV and listening to the radio were unrelated to political knowledge, as was overall time spent surfing the net. However, those who self-reported they got more news from the net, and rated the net as more useful as a media source were more knowledgeable in every domain. In terms of sources, those who mentioned the ABC or SBS as a TV news source were more knowledgeable than those who did not, and those who mentioned Radio National as a radio source were more knowledgeable than those who did not. No significant differences were observed among those who cited different newspapers and web sites: These sources were too diverse for the small sample to measure.

SUMMARY

The present study suggests that politically active people are more knowledgeable, as you would expect, and that politically knowledgeable and active people differ in their media use in being more net-reliant for news and choosing public broadcasting sources in TV and radio. This is in line with activists’ intuitions, but the small and relatively homogeneous sample we had here (mostly activist peaceniks) prevents us from being confident about the findings. We’re going to try and run the study again this year, so if you’re interested in later findings just let us know and we’ll copy you those as well. What we’ll be trying to get in the second study is a sample that includes more active right-wing respondents as well as more passive left-wing folk.

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!

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