

## **On the perceived bias of social news websites**

- Draft. Not to be cited. -

### **1. Abstract**

*Social news websites – news sites edited by their communities – combine traditional functions of the mass media with society-wide deliberation. These sites reflexively filter the mass and alternative media, by providing a platform where media contents can be promoted, examined and debated about. Insofar as these sites offer a filtered compilation of other media, they themselves can be examined as media organs. From this perspective, it is expected that the contents of social news sites are more balanced than those of any given individual media outlet. This study puts this expectation to the test, analyzing the perceived bias of three social news websites, in the context of the 2008 US presidential election. Results of the analysis suggest that social news sites are partisan in character, offering a largely one-sided coverage of news. Possible reasons for the perceived bias of such sites are discussed.*

### **2. The problem**

This paper studies social news websites, considering them as media organs. It is concerned with the output – contents – of such websites, and the perceived bias of this output, in the context of the 2008 US presidential election.

#### **2.1. Social news sites...**

Social news websites are websites which aggregate, filter and re-publish previously published online material, such as newspaper articles, blog posts, videos, pictures, or any given combination of these. In order to understand how these sites work, an analogy with conventional news media organs is helpful.

A social news site does not necessarily have dedicated, professional reporters and editors (although some of them (e.g. Newsvine 2009) do employ professional contributors). Instead, registered

members of the site – whoever they might be – submit already published articles (news items, opinion pieces or whatever else they find worthy of attention), thereby creating a pool of articles. Registered members of the site, in their editorial function, decide together that from the submitted articles, which ones will be re-published on the front page of the site (or in any case, on a part of the site that is meant to be more visible than other parts); that is, which submitted items are the best, most interesting, or more important from the communities' collective point of view.

This decision-making most often involves voting: generally, registered members can cast a vote for or against any item submitted to the site. Those items that get the most positive votes become leading material, published on the front page.

A common feature of social news websites is the ability for users to comment on the submitted items, in a similar manner as in the case of discussion fora or blogs. On certain social news sites, also individual user comments can be voted upon – the community thus can, to some extent, filter and moderate the discussion threads that are attached to the submitted items.

These discussion threads provide an opportunity for deliberation – open, rational and considerate debate – to happen on social news websites. In fact, the importance of social news sites lies precisely in the fact that they combine the reflective filtering of the contents of widely understood mass media with deliberation. On the one hand, this means that the filtering itself is potentially exercised following deliberative principles (that is, the community's decision over whether or not a given article should be voted to the front page is based on the careful weighing of arguments for and against). On the other hand, it also means that the personal, informal and unconstrained deliberation (or at any rate, *discussion*) of private citizens could become public (and thus affect public opinion), by inevitably capturing at least some of the attention that is directed to social news sites by their news-hungry readers.

In other words: the primary function of social news sites might be the supply of news items and other articles, but the conversations attached to these articles might just as well receive attention (and even engage participation by the sites' readers).

Another important feature of social news sites is that they tend to employ a uniformed manner of presentation of articles, regardless of the source. In practice, this means that a blog post written by an unknown and independent blogger will be presented using the same layout and typographical elements as, say, an article from *The New York Times*. In theory, the only factor that matters in deciding what will get to the front page of a social news site is the items' perceived quality. Social news sites are thus, at least in theory, a highly meritocratic and egalitarian channel of mass media content. If someone feels that the mainstream media coverage of a given issue is lop-sided, they

can, on a social news website, present alternative points of view by submitting articles from alternative sources, or by commenting on the original articles.

Arguably, social news sites are in a good position to act as a “watchdog of the watchdog” – controlling and filtering mass media; and complementing mass media coverage of any given issue with the discursive presentation of the points of view of the sites' communities.

It is true that blogs and discussion boards provide similar possibilities, but blogs and discussion fora do not usually rely on the egalitarian, “democratic” principles of social news sites<sup>1</sup>, and most often their operation is not tied to the function of filtering and disseminating mass media messages. (For an excellent overview of blogs as alternative media, and an analysis of the communication inequalities of blogs, see Kenix 2009.)

In addition, it is to be noted why social news sites are “social”: the term hints to such sites incorporating some functions of online social network sites (such as *Facebook* or *LinkedIn*). Members of such sites can establish and maintain contacts with each other through the sites themselves; for example, one can conveniently get notified about the articles that one's friends have submitted, voted for, or commented on.

## 2.2. ...and deliberative democracy

Social news sites thus provide a possible, if partial, solution to a problem the troubles Jürgen Habermas' model of deliberative democracy (Habermas 2004:304 – 308, 315 – 328, 359 – 366, 2005:387 – 388, 2006: 415 – 418).

This model describes a procedural model of democracy, where the legitimacy of power is guaranteed by the ideal process through which political decisions are made. “Deliberation” in its ideal sense refers to the carefully rational, open, inclusive, non-oppressive, non-violent and egalitarian debate of issues at hand – but, importantly, the concept is translated into practice in any number of ways (“Political deliberation, broadly understood [...] responds to different issues with a different logic and mode of communication”, Habermas 2005: 387.) The model expects society-wide deliberation to take place in a division of labour: the **informal, wild flows of communication**

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1 For example, the author and the commenter are not in an equal communicative position on a blog: no matter how compelling argument a commenter makes, the owner of the blog might just delete the comment or question, or in any case ignore it (cf. Kenix 2009). In contrast, arguing and representing alternative points of view does “make sense” on social news sites, insofar as there is no dedicated, single source of authority over what should get published and how. Certain other features of social news sites (such as the ability of users to rate each other's comments, and then to be able to view the comments in order of their popularity) further encourages debate and considered argumentation: if you make a compelling argument, you can expect it to be rated high, which means it is going to be seen by more readers, which means it is going to be more influential than a poorly devised argument.

that stem from our everyday life talks as citizens, are filtered, organized and put up for debate in the public sphere by the mass media, and the resulting strands of “considered opinion” influence the **formal, qualified deliberation of the political system.**

However, a problem arises in this model, when it is *not* the political decision making core (the parliament or the state's legislative bodies) where important decisions are made. This is typically the case in national elections and referenda.

In these latter cases, ideally, individual members of the whole society are expected to deliberate over the issue at hand, and cast their vote accordingly. This, as also Habermas (2004: 305) himself clearly states, is impossible for practical reasons. Deliberation might produce objectively good results – if it happens in small groups; but when it comes to larger groups, let alone to the whole of a complex society, it quickly becomes unfeasible, or at least highly impractical.

This leads to an apparent paradox: democratic power is legitimate only because of the deliberative process through which it is exercised, but the citizens' decisions about distributing political power to different parties *cannot* be legitimate, because society-wide deliberation cannot, in practice, work, and thus the decision reached by the society as such will be procedurally incorrect.

The solution could be *mediated deliberation*: there is no need for every member of the society to engage in deliberation (cf. Mill 1991 (quoted by Steenbergen et al. 2003), Xenos 2008). It is sufficient if only a smaller number of political activists engage in actual debate, as long as they represent everyone who is potentially affected, and as long as the debate that they are having reaches – presumably through the mass media – everyone who is potentially affected.

But this requires the mass media to be, as Habermas (2006) claims, self-regulating, open, independent and reflexive<sup>2</sup>. Social news sites, by their very working principle, might be a step in the direction of achieving this goal; through the filtering, questioning, critique and public debate of mass media messages.

### **2.3. Social news sites as media organs**

As mentioned, I focus in this paper on social news sites as media organs, analyzing their contents, not their deliberative function. More precisely, I am to confirm or reject the hypothesis that such sites provide an output that is *balanced*, either through the neutral tone of the majority of published articles, or through the presentation of all sides to a debate roughly equally.

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<sup>2</sup> As an additional requirement for mediated political communication to assist deliberation in complex societies, Habermas also stipulates the need for an active, engaged, responsive civil society.

This hypothesis takes is built upon the following factors.

Social news sites are reasonably expected not to be interested in trying to limit their output to representing only one side of an issue. It is also reasonable to expect that such sites will not be interested to distort the argumentation process in such a way that a certain side to an issue is negatively affected.

This is because insofar as these sites are accessible free of charge – which they tend to be –, they are likely to run, at least partially, on advertising revenues. Consequently, they are interested in attracting the largest possible readership. If a social news site's contents were seen by readers as strongly and consistently biased or distorted, this might – through the dual effect of visitors' desire for opinion reinforcement, and aversion to opinion challenge (Garrett 2009) – discourage dissenters to visit. It is not easy to maintain social contacts in an environment where one is alone with one's opinion (Sunstein 2007: 65 – 69). Thus if a site turned into a mouthpiece of a given side to the debate, it would likely lose a significant part of visitors who happen to represent the other sides.

On the other hand, if a social news site maintains the image that visitors, regardless of the opinions they endorse, are welcome, and if it is emphasized that the ruling “public opinion” of the site can in reality be changed – then it is likely that readers having conflicting opinions will continue to visit the site.

This feature of social news sites is crucial. They provide their users with a real and tangible opportunity to have their voice – and arguments – heard, even in spite of conflicting views. And while it certainly might be easier to pontificate on one's own blog, or on a discussion forum where the majority of users shares one's views, social news sites might look like more attractive places to do so, because they tend to be popular (in terms of visitors), at least much more popular than most of the personal blogs<sup>3</sup>. Again, looking at such sites with the analogy of newspapers, it is arguably better for a political activist to publish an article on the front page of a large (inter)national daily – which might also contain dissenting opinion –, than on the front page of the internal leaflet of a marginal political activist organization, which reaches a far smaller number of readers. Admittedly, this second option will be much easier, but its potential effects are expected to be considerably smaller too.

So it is reasonable to suppose that social news sites are places frequented by individuals having conflicting opinions. If so, then it is also reasonable to suppose that the overall contents of such sites are going to be balanced; either because only those items will get through the filter of the

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<sup>3</sup> According to the figures of blog search engine *Technorati* (2009), the most popular political blogs are *The Huffington Post (HP)*, *The Daily Kos*, *The Daily Dish*, *The Corner (at National Review)* and *Think Progress*. According to web traffic analyst site *Alexa* (2009), the most popular of these (HP) is the only one that comes close to the reach and traffic rank figures of *Digg*, the most popular social news site. HP is neck and neck with *Reddit* – another archetypal social news website – but the other blogs mentioned above (which only represent the tiniest tip of the iceberg that is the mass of the millions of existing and active political blogs), are in the “also ran” category.

community that please all sides to a debate, or, on the other hand, because popular items expressing partisan bias will balance each other out.

(Should this happen, this latter option is actually more promising for deliberation, because this would result in the publishing of conflicting opinion – in the words of Mutz (2006), providing *cross-cutting exposure* – a crucial ingredient of deliberative discussion. On the other hand, this might also lead to lowering the levels of political activism in the sites' readers (ibid).)

**H1: The output of social news sites tends to be balanced: either in the way that their contents will mostly include neutral articles, or in the way that the contents represent a mixture of articles of conflicting opinion, representing different sides of issues, which balance each other out.**

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. The concept and operationalization of bias

In their seminal study, presenting a meta-analysis of five decades of prior media bias studies, D'Alessio and Allen (2000) found that in general, the American news media were perceived as exhibiting little and insubstantial bias in connection with the presidential elections. In subsequent years, this claim has been contested, most notably by Goldberg (2002), who wrote about a “blatantly true” liberal bias of the media elite, and Alterman (2003), who claimed the exact opposite. In more recent studies, Weatherly et al. (2007) measured the perceived bias of television channels *Fox News* and *CNN*, and found that although the latter's headlines were perceived as showing significantly stronger liberal bias than the headlines of Fox, also Fox's headlines were rated as “slightly on the liberal side of neutral.” In contrast, Eisinger, Veenstra and Koehn (2007) found no significant ideological bias in US newspaper articles.

These are but some examples of the many studies that focused on bias in the US news media. Regardless of their findings, a common point among them is that they all had to tackle the problem of conceptualizing and measuring bias.

D'Alessio and Allen (2000) underlined that bias had experimentally been demonstrated to be “a perception, rather than a matter of objective agreement”. From the prior research that they studied, D'Alessio and Allen distilled three kinds of bias: *gatekeeping bias*, *coverage bias*, and *statement bias*.

The first of these concerns the decisions of writers and editors about what to write (or broadcast)

about. Coverage bias, in contrast, deals with the amount of coverage (time and/or space) dedicated to the different parties that are represented in an issue; and statement bias refers to the phenomenon of members of the media “interject[ing] their own opinions into the text of the coverage of an issue.” Statement bias can take many, explicit or implicit forms, such as the use of value-laden expressions in the description of personalities, or the use of particular illustrations to a written article, etc.

Eisinger et al. (2007) studied one specific form of statement bias: labeling bias. They were concerned with how the labels “liberal” and “conservative” were used in newspaper articles, the underlying hypothesis being that whatever is *not* the default or mainstream, whatever is different to the taken-for-granted and accepted, needs to be identified more often. (Goldberg (2002) based his claims of liberal media bias on the perception that conservative personalities are more often identified as such than liberals are, because being liberal is the “mainstream”, the “natural” state of things.) In their study, they referred to Herbert Gans' (2003, as quoted by Eisinger et al. 2007) definition of bias: “when not telling the whole story is viewed as inaccuracy” – a definition that again underlines the subjective nature of bias.

Correspondingly, Weatherly et al. did not define explicitly what bias is; rather, they left it to the individual discretion of their experiment subjects if they perceived a news headline as biased or not (2007). (Given their convenience sample of college students, I'd venture to say this is a questionable practice, even though it can be argued that no single definition of bias could cover the many different interpretations of the concept.)

There thus seems to be a consensus on that bias depends upon individual perception; and I suspect that few would question the negative connotations attached to the word. Bias is inaccuracy – or worse; something that news journalism should definitely avoid.

But in this study, I am to look at bias from a different perspective.

One underlying assumption in the literature about bias seems to be that the concept does not make sense in any other context than that of *news* reporting. Surely opinion pieces, editorials, or, for that matter, pieces of advertisement are “biased” – but then it is one of their functions to be so.

However, social news sites are *news* sites only in their name; or at best in the sense that whatever they publish on their front pages should be relatively new. But given that they are edited by a loose and haphazard community of editors, each of whom might have different values and standards on what makes a good article, it is unreasonable to expect that only strictly “news” items will get submitted and republished there.

On these sites, the line between fact and opinion is not only blurred but non-existent, insofar as each

submitted article will be treated and presented in the exact same manner, regardless of being a piece of objective news report, an opinion piece, or some mixture of the two.

Here it is important to note what “re-publishing” means on a social news site. With particular examples to the contrary, the general state of things is that social news sites do not themselves host any content (except for the written discussions that are going on on the sites), but only keep track of hyperlinks that point to the submitted articles. When a user clicks on one of these links, he or she gets transferred to the content's original location.

Thus at the original location of the article, it might become apparent if the item in question is an opinion piece, or a news item. But whether or not this piece of information is made explicit remains the responsibility of the content's original publisher.

As I have argued before, the presence of opinionated – biased – articles on a social news site is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, from the point of view of deliberative democracy, it might be beneficial – as one of the key ingredients of deliberation is the exposure to conflicting opinion (Mutz 2006, Sunstein 2007, cf. also Eveland & Hutchens Hively 2009). On the other hand, were we to find that articles in general on social news sites exhibit no substantial bias, that would be a result to welcome too, as it would mean that such sites efficiently filter the contents of mass media from ideological bias, distilling only the facts.

All this taken into consideration, how to define bias?

I came to the conclusion to define the concept here – and in the context of the 2008 US elections, which I am using as a subject topic to explore the phenomenon – in the following way: **an article should be considered biased if the reader (viewer) can, with confidence, infer from the article which candidate or party the author supported (in the 2008 US presidential election).**

(With reference to the tripartite system devised by D'Alessio and Allen, this conceptualization combines the elements of *statement* and *coverage* bias. Gatekeeping bias, understood in reference to the social news site as a whole, could be measured not through the individual articles that get republished there, but through the totality of the contents of the site.)

Some reserves, however, need to be formulated.

The “author” in this context might not be the same as the person who actually created the piece of text, video or image that is somehow transmitted to the end user. Further, “the author” might also refer to a group of people, as well as to a single person. Under the term, I mean that (or those) person(s) who published the article in the format and in the “packaging” in which the article reaches the reader. I'd like to clarify this through some examples.

- (a) The original item (submitted to a social news website) is an opinion piece originally published in the online version of *The New York Times*: “the author” refers, plainly, to the actual author of the piece.
- (b) The original item (submitted to a social news website) is a blog post, citing and commenting on an opinion piece that had originally been published in *The New York Times*. “The author” in this case refers to whoever is responsible for the blog post. (Naturally, the objective of the post might very well have been to refute, or at least debate with, the original article.)
- (c) The item is a segment of *The Daily Show* television program, as accessed on the show's own homepage. “The author” collectively refers to whoever produced the segment.
- (d) The item is a short clip from an episode of *The Daily Show*, uploaded to the video hosting site *YouTube* by someone apparently not involved in the production of the show. “The author” refers to this someone. (Again, the author's intentions might be different to those of the producers of the show.)

Another important reserve that needs to me made stems from the context of the 2008 US presidential election. It addresses the question: what happens, if the author does not express support for any candidate, but criticizes one (or several) of them?

In a pilot study, coders were asked to infer from articles the authors' views on each of the potential candidates separately. The underlying idea for this was that bias directed at any one of the candidates does not necessarily provide sufficient information about the views of the author on all the *other* candidates. For instance, it is entirely possible, that one would have agreed with and supported Republican presidential candidate John McCain, while at the same time disagreeing with his running mate Sarah Palin. It is also possible that one would have agreed, at least on some level, with both major presidential candidates. And the critique of a certain major-party presidential candidate might not mean support for the other major candidate: the author might just have preferred a third, minor-party nominee.

But this research design proved too error prone, and did not provide satisfactory inter-coder reliability. In addition, the political context of the elections also justified the simplification of the research design, with the inclusion of the following assumption: **unless otherwise stated, the author's opinion expression towards any member of a major party ticket is to be understood also as an expression of the opposite opinion towards the other major party ticket.**

For example, should the author express support for (Democratic vice presidential nominee) Joe Biden, this is to be coded as perceived preference for the Democratic Party's ticket; and should the author be perceived as criticizing (Democratic presidential nominee) Barack Obama, this is to be coded as preference for the Republican Party's ticket (even though it might be argued that criticizing

one side does not automatically mean endorsing the other).

This assumption embodies a certain disregard for minor, third party candidates. However, given the peculiarities of the US electoral system, and the historic dominance of the Republican and Democratic parties (Ashbee 2004: 184 – 188, 227), the only realistic choice has traditionally, since the American Civil War, been a binary choice between candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties. It is reasonable to suppose that this fact was widely acknowledged by members of the American public (and especially by those involved in the media), prompting authors to make their disagreement with this binary choice explicit.

Thus, unless explicitly stated otherwise, authors were to be seen as thinking along the lines of “if not the Democrats, then the Republicans – and vice versa.” This resulted in a simplified research design, where coders only had to answer a single question about each item in the sample. They had to infer from the texts, images and videos that comprised each article, whom the author supported in the elections. (Naturally, one option was to code articles as “unclear” in their bias – in case the coders could not infer from the article with great certainty the author's preference.)

### **3.2. Sampling and coding**

The 2008 US presidential election was chosen as a subject topic of the analysis. Elections have traditionally been a preferred subject of bias studies (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000), as “the area of presidential politics [...] is uniquely simplified in terms of the study of media bias;” and last year's election campaign, given the peculiar character of the nominees (the first ever Afro-American presidential candidate versus a female vice-presidential candidate of colourful personality), was expected to attract considerable attention from newsreaders, and to generate considerable amounts of media output.

The sampling period spanned between 1<sup>st</sup> September and 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2008. This period covers almost in entirety the election campaign (the time between the respective conventions of the Democratic and the Republican parties, and election day, the 4<sup>th</sup> of November).

The sampled articles were collected from three different social news websites, namely *Digg*, *Newsvine* and *Reddit*.

Digg is the most popular and largest (most visited) social news site to date (Alexa 2009). It is also run by an independent company (Digg, Inc.), which is not affiliated with a major media organization (Digg 2009). Newsvine, a considerably smaller site, is owned by media conglomerate MSNBC (Newsvine 2009a). It is also different from Digg in that it actively encourages members to publish their own material on the site (e.g. every registered member is given his or her own column on Newsvine). Finally, Reddit is between Digg and Newsvine in size (Alexa 2009). It is considered

affiliated with the mainstream media, insofar as it's owned by the international publishing house *Condé Nast*. (Condé Nast 2009)

Arguably, different websites could also have been chosen for sampling – there are many more social news websites that exist. Given the fragmented attention patterns that describe the web – that is, any given website can only capture a tiny fraction of the attention that is directed at the totality of websites –, it would be hard to contest the inclusion of any given website in the sample solely on the grounds of perceived unpopularity or low importance. I chose Digg as it is regarded as the oldest and most popular social news website, Reddit as an archetypal rival, and Newsvine as something that shares the fundamental principles of operation with the other two, yet comes across as something quite different, given the different set of features it provides for users.

For every day of the sampling period, the list of articles that acquired most of the user votes during the previous 24 hours was archived. Only those articles were considered in the archives as relevant which were categorized by the site (in the case of Digg and Reddit) or by the archiver (in the case of Newsvine) as related to the topic of US politics. From these lists, the top four articles on each of the websites were retrieved. For each of the websites, 14 articles were included in the sample: the most popular article on fourteen randomly selected days of the sampling period. Thus the final sample consisted of 42 items (the list of which can be found in the appendix), each of which received, on a given day of the sampling period, most of the votes on one of the sampled websites.

The sample items include textual articles, videos, images, and combinations of these. Printable items were printed out for coding, and the videos were given to coders on CDs.

Each item of the sample was coded by two coders. One of the coders was in each case myself; other coders were undergraduate students of the University of Vaasa, whose language proficiency had been ascertained prior to coding. Before the coding process, coders were instructed and briefed about the context of the elections at a training session. Coders also received printed information material about important personalities and events of the elections.

Bias is a matter of perception; and perception is influenced by one's own views and commitment to the issue at hand. Hence, coders' attitudes towards the major candidates, as well as the level of their involvement in the 2008 US elections, was measured.

As Choi, Yang and Chang (2009) argue, one's involvement in an issue can lead to a slanted perception of media reports about the issue. But importantly, one can “be involved” in an issue in different ways, and not all of the different kinds of involvement contribute to distorting one's perception.

Notably, we can distinguish between value relevant (or ego-) involvement, outcome-relevant and

impression-relevant involvement. Ego-involvement is concerned with one's personal guiding values; outcome-relevant involvement means that someone considers an issue important because of its practical and tangible consequences; and impression-relevant involvement refers to the individual's concern with the consequences of his (or her) opinion on the perception of the self by others (i.e. the individual thinks that his (or her) opinion on the issue will be an important clue on which others will form their opinion about the individual). (Cho & Boster, 2005)

According to Choi, Yang and Chang (2009), a slanted perception of media only correlated with ego-involvement, but not with outcome- or impression-relevant involvement. More precisely, a high level of value-relevant involvement increases the likelihood of *hostile media perception (HMP)*: the more engaged someone is about an issue, the likelier it is that this person will judge media output about this issue as unfavorably biased.

Hence, coders' ego-involvement in the 2008 US presidential election was measured by the scale developed by Cho & Boster (2005). Ego involvement scores, together with information about coders' attitudes towards the various candidates, could explain why the articles were perceived as highly biased.

As I have mentioned, the task of the coders was to infer from the text – insofar as they deemed this possible – the party preference of the author of each item in the sample. At the pre-coding training session, a number of examples were discussed, and coders were also reminded of potential signs of bias in a brief note on the answer sheets. Attention was drawn in particular to openly stated expressions of opinion, to attempts of making fun of a party or a candidate, to the peculiarities of adjective use, and to the absence or presence of counter-arguments in an article. Coders were to code articles as biased only in case they felt that they could, with confidence, justify their decision.

#### **4. Results**

Results of the study are summarized in Table 1.

	Supportive bias towards the <b>Democratic Party</b>	Supportive bias towards the <b>Republican Party</b>	Supportive bias towards a <b>third party</b>	<b>Uncertain or insignificant bias</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Digg</b>	12 (92%)	0	0	1 (8%)	13
<b>Reddit</b>	10 (77%)	0	0	3 (23%)	13
<b>Newsvine</b>	9 (75%)	0	0	3 (25%)	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>31 (82%)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7 (18%)</b>	<b>38</b>

*Table 1. The number and percentage of articles in which bias was perceived for the Democratic, Republican, and third, other parties. Articles over which the coders disagreed (n=4) were discarded.*

Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's formula (alpha = 0.72, with a percentage agreement of 90%), and also with Cohen's less conservative kappa measure of agreement (0.71, suggesting substantially strong agreement beyond chance). Those articles over which coders disagreed (n=4) were discarded, thus the table only includes those items over which both coders agreed.

It is noteworthy how the websites, in spite of their differences, have a uniform pattern about them; as though the structural disparities among them (size, ownership, scope of interactive features etc.) did not affect the perceived bias of their output.

In the light of the above results, **H1 is rejected: none of the three examined social news websites showed signs of publishing a balanced output.** All across the board, there were no articles exhibiting supportive bias for the Republican Party, or for a third party, and in only a small minority of cases were the items judged as neutral or ambiguous.

However, coders' attitudes and involvement need to be taken into consideration when evaluating the results. All four coders – none of whom could actually participate in the 2008 US elections – expressed support for the Democratic Party. Coders' involvement was measured on the 5-item ego-involvement scale developed by Cho and Boster (2005). The five items comprising the scale are themselves 7-point Likert-type scales, giving participants the response range from *strongly disagree* (-3) to *strongly agree* (3). Coders' responses to the five items of the scale were summed up and averaged, resulting in the standardized involvement scores of -0.6, 0.6, 1.0 and 1.6.

It is expected that higher levels of value-relevant involvement increase the chance of hostile media perception (Choi, Yang & Chang 2009). The more involved someone is in an issue (at least as far as

the value-relevant dimension of involvement is concerned), the higher the chances that this person will perceive media reports (biased in whichever direction to whichever extent!) about the issue as biased *against* the person's own views.

Supposing that ego-involvement scores in general would follow a normal distribution pattern (in the interval of [-3, 3],  $M=0$ ,  $SD=1.0$ ), it can be seen that none of the coders scored extremely high or low on the involvement scale, with only one of them producing a score more than 1 SD above the mean. This coder coded 21 items. In spite of his slightly elevated level of involvement, and contrary to what was expected in the accordance with the hostile media perception-theory, this particular coder did not code any items as showing “hostile” bias, and only 3 items (14%) as showing no discernible bias.

Thus it is argued that in the present study, no traces of hostile media phenomenon (HMP) were observed. Even though coders attitudes' were unanimously favourable towards the Democratic Party, they coded no article as showing hostile bias (i.e. as exhibiting favourable bias towards the Republicans).

## **5. Discussion**

Social news sites carry the promise of balanced reporting – in theory. In practice, the observed sites turned out to be representing considerable positive bias towards the Democratic Party, without matching bias for the GOP, and with only a small minority (about one in five) of articles representing a neutral or balanced view.

Two questions arise in connection with these results. First, what factors lie behind them? And second, is the partisan nature of social news websites a good thing?

### **5.1. Possible explanations**

One possible explanation for the results suggests that supporters of the Democratic Party are over-represented among members of social news websites, and that they use these sites for campaigning. This would mean that the pool of submitted articles – from which members of such sites can select items to vote to the front page – is already limited, and the subsequent deliberation and voting is expected to be slanted as well. In addition, the process could strengthen itself, as conservative-leaning users might feel discouraged of using social news sites because of the overwhelming amount of conflicting opinion they might encounter. (Not many people like to stay in a place where challenging the ruling public opinion seems impossible (and attempts at doing so seem pointless).

(Cf. Sunstein 2007: 50 – 51.)

A survey enquiring into the demographic and socio-economic status of social news site users could confirm or reject this hypothesis.

Another possible explanation could be that, although the user base of social news sites is ideologically balanced and heterogeneous, liberal-leaning users are more active, and/or have larger groups of online friends, and thus they are abler to promote their interests and points of view.

It also might be that social news sites *themselves* do not remain neutral in the voting process, and in certain ways influence what gets to their front pages, and what does not.

Finally, we must not forget about the option that the represented bias is, in fact, the result of careful, open, and procedurally correct deliberation – i.e. that it is present with the acknowledgement of conservative-leaning users, who happen to concede in an overwhelming majority of cases that the front-page position of an item exhibiting liberal bias is justified. An analysis of the discussions going on on social news sites is to confirm or reject this idea.

## **5.2. Slanted filtering – is it a good thing?**

As I argued, the importance of social news sites lies in the fact that they, combining society-wide, open and informal deliberation with public dissemination of information, reflexively filter the mass media. I hypothesized that this filtering would result in a balanced output – more balanced, and arguably, more varied, than the output of any given individual media organ. As we have seen, this is not the case.

On the one hand, from a certain point of view of deliberative democracy, this is a disappointing result. Instead of giving their readers factual, neutral information, or, what would even be better: providing them with different viewpoints about a given issue, these sites seem to support, in unison, one of the sides in a debate.

On the other hand, it might be that such a state of things is the result of deliberation, in which counter-arguments were carefully examined, and rejected as being weak.

The debate, in any case, should be open; arguably, it makes sense if even the most ridiculous point of view is mentioned, because then the faults of this point of view can be identified, drawn attention to, and corrected. And so it might be that the bias is a *considered* one; one that was arrived at while rejecting other, inferior arguments supporting conflicting views.

However, what also needs to be considered is the fact that it is highly likely that much more people read the front-page articles than the discussions attached to these. In these discussions, arguments and counter-arguments were (possibly) discussed and evaluated. Those who do not participate in, or

do not subsequently read, these conversations (which can easily span several hundred individual comments), will lose out from the debate, and possibly will not become aware of *why* a particular article was chosen as front-page worthy. Which means that even if the exhibited bias of social news sites is justified, it is unlikely to be beneficial for the deliberative opinion formation of readers.

But if the role of social news sites in deliberative democracy is questionable, their slanted filtering of mass media could be perceived as beneficial from the point of view of civic culture and political activism. These sites might not facilitate the meeting and debate of opposing sides, but at least they are expected to encourage the activism of those who share their points of view (Mutz 2006). And after all it might be – it is even *likely* – that particular other social news websites exist, or will come to life, representing different ideological bias, and applying a “counter-slanted” filtering to the mass media.

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**Appendix 1. – List of sampled articles**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Publishing website</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Original source</b>
17/10/17	Digg	MCCAIN'S DEER IN THE HEADLIGHTS MOMENT	User "scbabj" on YouTube
27/09/08	Digg	Obama To McCain: On Iraq, "You Were Wrong"	The Huffington Post
30/09/08	Digg	Palin/McCain Couric interview	Unknown YouTube user
12/09/08	Digg	This Is How You Stick It To Lying Republican Hacks	The Jed Report
10/09/08	Digg	Obama Blasts McCain on Lipstickgate: Enough of the lies!	Unknown YouTube user
17/10/08	Digg	McCain Using Same Robocall Firm That Helped Smear Him In 2000	The Huffington Post
28/09/08	Digg	Palin Claimed Dinosaurs And People Coexisted	The Huffington Post
09/10/08	Digg	McCain-Palin Rally Attendees: "Obama Is A Terrorist"	The Huffington Post
19/10/08	Digg	Powell endorses Obama for president	MSNBC
30/10/08	Digg	Obama Not A Socialist, McCain Admits (VIDEO)	The Huffington Post
26/09/08	Digg	McCain Wins Debate	The Washington Post
21/10/08	Digg	Palin Claims The Vice President Is 'In Charge Of The U.S. Senate'	Think Progress
20/10/08	Digg	BREAKING: CA GOP Vote Registration Contractor Arrested for Registration Fraud, Perjury*	The Brad Blog
29/09/08	Digg	CNN Laughs It Up Over Sarah Palin Interview	Talking Points Memo (TPM) through YouTube
01/10/08	Newsvine	Bill Clinton: Economic Crisis Menas Vee Choice Is More Important	Talking Points Memo (TPM)
21/10/08	Newsvine	Is it time to scrap the Electoral College?	MSNBC
30/10/08	Newsvine	Obama predicts 'significant recession'	Newsvine (AP)
09/09/08	Newsvine	Palin Billed State for Nights Spent at Home	The Washington Post
13/09/08	Newsvine	NYT: McCain barbs stir cries of distortion	MSNBC
16/09/08	Newsvine	The Sarah Palin Phenomenon Is Doomed	CBS News
11/10/08	Newsvine	McCain strikes back at Obama ally*	MSNBC
07/10/08	Newsvine	John McCain's unprecedentedly ugly speech today	Salon.com
28/09/08	Newsvine	AP Investigation: Palin got zoning aid, gifts	Newsvine (AP)
06/10/08	Newsvine	McCain accuses Obama of lying*	MSNBC
16/10/08	Newsvine	'Plumber' says he has no plumbing license	MSNBC

30/09/08	Newsvine	Analysis: With bailout, McCain reaches dead end	Newsvine (AP)
05/09/08	Newsvine	Was John McCain's speech effective tonight in connecting with voters and addressing core issues such as the economy and health care?	MSNBC
10/10/08	Newsvine	Obama: McCain trying to divide country	MSNBC
27/09/08	Reddit	Vote up if you know that Ahmadinejad didn't really say "Wipe Israel off the map" which McCain just repeated in the debates to play into our fears	User "gravitypushes" on Reddit
24/10/08	Reddit	Campaign Volunteer Faces Charges In Attack Hoax	KDKA Online
10/09/08	Reddit	McCain: Lipstick on pig OK for Hillary Sarah Palin Too Frail to Handle It?	User "tomm2thumbs" on YouTube
16/10/08	Reddit	Al-Jazeera Exposes Racism At Sarah Palin Rally in Ohio	Prose Before Hos blog
08/09/08	Reddit	Is there anyone else out there that wants to see the debates be moderated by Jon Stewart?	User "maefly2" on Reddit
29/09/08	Reddit	The 3 A.M. Call	The New York Times
05/10/08	Reddit	Not that it matters...	Leisha's Random Thoughts & Ponderings blog
20/09/08	Reddit	Thank John McCain – support @ TruthandHope.org	User "vote4thefuture" on YouTube
10/10/08	Reddit	IN A SINKING ECONOMY (HOUSEHOLD HELP)	User "PatrickWilkinson" on YouTube
24/09/08	Reddit	Obama rejects McCain call to delay debate	MSNBC
12/09/08	Reddit	Blizzard of Lies	The New York Times
18/09/08	Reddit	The Pain in Spain Falls Mainly on McCain	TIME
20/10/08	Reddit	HOW TO: Vote Early – A State-by-State Guide*	Democratic Convention Watch blog
28/09/08	Reddit	Interrupting the negotiations to save his campaign	User "DemRapidResponse" on YouTube

\*: coders disagreed about perceived bias in these articles