NOTE: Two peer-reviewed articles based on this survey have been published since this report was first released. If you would like to cite these results, we encourage you to read and reference one of these more comprehensive papers.

Garrett, R. K. (2011). Troubling consequences of online political rumoring. Human Communication Research, 37(2), 255-274. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2958.2010.01401.x

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SURVEY BRIEF:

Rumors and the Internet in the 2008 U.S. Presidential election

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Summary of findings

- This study focused on respondents' familiarity with false rumors about the presidential and vice presidential candidates and on their use of online sources of campaign information during the 2008 U.S. election. These results are based on a national telephone survey of 600 Americans conducted in the two weeks immediately following the election. The margin of error for the complete data set is +/- 4.4% with 95% confidence.

Rumor familiarity and beliefs

- Familiarity with rumors about the presidential and vice presidential candidates varied widely. A few were well known – 91% of respondents had heard the rumor that Barack Obama is Muslim, and 40% had heard the claim that Sarah Palin banned books in Alaska. But most rumors were not widely known – only 15% had heard the rumor that Obama thought the national anthem should be replaced and 11% heard that McCain admitted to committing war crimes on 60 Minutes.
- Rumors about those on the Democratic ticket were more widely known than rumors about the Republican ticket. On average, respondents had heard two rumors about the Democrats versus only one about the Republicans.
- Rumors that were known by more people were also more widely disputed. That is, both a particular rumor and also evidence that the rumor was false appear to spread in tandem.
- Relatively few people believed that the rumors that we asked about were true, ranging from 22% to 3% of the respondents.
- However, as many as half of those who heard a given rumor did believe it was true, and in most cases, at least one-fourth of the respondents believed the rumor they had heard.
- People were more likely to accept rumors about the candidate they opposed than about the candidate they supported. Very few Americans believed rumors about their preferred candidate.

Online campaign news

- Online media were an important source of campaign information in the 2008 election season, used by nearly two-thirds of Americans. Almost two in five said they got campaign information online every day.
- People relied on both formal and informal channels for their online election news. News organizations' web sites and email from friends and family were the leading sources of campaign information, with each being used by about half the respondents.
- Americans relied on a significant variety of online sources, including news summary services such as Google News or Digg, online video sites such as YouTube, and politically oriented online sources such as FactCheck, Politico, NewsMax, and the DailyKos.

Rumors online

- People who got news online heard more rumors, but also encountered more evidence that the rumors were false.
- Online news use did not have much influence on how many rumors people believed.

Introduction

People who pay attention to politics, especially during the period of a national election, are frequently exposed to “knowledge claims”–statements about “facts” regarding politics. At least some of these claims can also be characterized as rumors–claims that are generally unsubstantiated and often untrue. Some observers of the 2008 Presidential campaign have commented on the prevalence of rumors in the lead up to Election Day and even that the circulation of false claims about candidates from both parties was a defining feature of this election. In 2008, the Internet appears to have been a key medium for circulating rumors and a central battleground on which the fight to distinguish truth from fiction was waged. Snopes.com, a web site dedicated to tracking and investigating online rumors, identified dozens of email chain letters concerning Barack Obama, John McCain, Joe Biden and Sarah Palin. FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan service of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, was another independent site that vigorously responded to false information. News organizations prominently featured political fact checking initiatives, such as the Washington Post’s Fact Check and the St. Petersburg Times’ PolitiFact. And the campaigns responded by sponsoring their own fact-checking programs, exemplified by the Obama campaign’s “Fight the Smear” web site.

Given this frenzy of rumor activity online and in the news, we wondered how it was influencing Americans. How prevalent was awareness of rumors and how widely were rumors believed? What factors influenced the circulation and acceptance of these untruths? And, with the increasing prominence of online news and campaign information, what was the role of the Internet? To answer these questions, we commissioned a representative national telephone survey of 600 adult Americans. The survey was conducted in the two weeks immediately following the 2008 election (from November 6 through 20).

In order to assess individuals’ exposure to rumors, we selected eight false statements circulating via email during the 2008 election cycle, as compiled by Fact Check and Snopes.com. The statements were selected based on a variety of factors, including their reported prevalence and the strength of the evidence that they were false. The rumors that we analyzed are blatant falsehoods that no candidate had explicitly sanctioned. For comparison, we also asked respondents about two widely circulating, but factually accurate statements. Although we tried to select a diverse assortment of rumors, we note that

this is not a representative sample: many rumors were excluded and we cannot confirm that the rumors we selected were the most prevalent.

Hearing rumors

Familiarity with the rumors we analyzed varied substantially: rumors ranged from virtually unheard of to almost universally known (see Table 1). Four of the eight rumors were familiar to at least 40% of the respondents. By far the most widely known rumor was the claim that Obama is Muslim: fully nine out of ten respondents (91%) had heard this claim at some point. Three of the four most widely known rumors were about the Democrats, although 40% had heard that Palin had banned books while serving as Mayor of Wasilla. In contrast, four of the eight rumors we asked about were unknown to most people. Only about one in six (15%) Americans had heard the rumor that Obama wanted to replace the national anthem with "something conveying a less war-like message," and fewer than one in ten (9%) had ever encountered the claim that Palin referred to dinosaurs as "Lizards of Satan". (As an aside, we note that both of these low-circulation rumors originated as jokes, and were never advanced by their authors as true.) Interestingly, respondents' familiarity with the two factual statements included in the survey was comparable to their familiarity with some of the better known rumors. About two in five (39%) had heard of Biden's remark that paying higher taxes was patriotic, and about half (48%) were familiar with the timing of McCain's divorce and remarriage.

Table 1. Percent of Americans who heard, heard challenges to, and believed claims about candidates

	Heard	Heard challenge [a]	Believed [a]
Rumors about the Democratic ticket			
Barack Obama is a Muslim.	91%	55%	22%
Barack Obama does not qualify as a natural-born citizen of the U.S.	59	30	10
The bulk of donations to the Obama campaign came from a handful of wealthy foreign financiers.	41	11	20
Barack Obama said that the national anthem conveys a "war-like message" and should be replaced with "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing".	15	3	6
Rumors about the Republican ticket			
While serving as the Mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, Sarah Palin successfully banned several books from the local library.	40%	15%	13%
While serving in the Navy, John McCain caused the 1967 fire aboard the USS Forrestal, resulting in the deaths of more than 100 sailors.	17	4	4
John McCain said during a 60 Minutes interview that he was a “war criminal” who “bombed innocent women and children”.	11	3	3
Sarah Palin said that “God made dinosaurs 4,000 years ago,” and called them “Lizards of Satan”.	9	2	3
Factual statements			
Joe Biden said that wealthy Americans who pay higher taxes are being patriotic.	39%	9%	17%
In 1980, John McCain divorced his wife of almost 15 years and married 25-year-old Cindy five weeks later.	48	2	27

Notes. a. Percent of respondents shown, but only asked of respondents who heard the rumor.

We also note that there are clear differences in awareness of rumors about the candidates on the Democratic and Republican tickets. Respondents were more familiar with the false statements about Obama than those about McCain and Palin. For example, as described above, more than twice as many Americans were familiar with the rumor that Obama was Muslim than were familiar with the rumor that Palin banned books, the most prevalent false claim about the Republican ticket. These patterns appear consistent with news media accounts of rumors circulating during the election. In the

last weeks of the election, some journalists went so far as to suggest that the McCain campaign was more actively engaged in promoting false information than the Obama campaign based on the findings of the various fact-checking services (see, for example, Manjoo, 2008). Fact Check, however, explicitly declined to take sides on this issue, observing that deciding which campaign was more deceitful "would require subjective judgments about the degree of untruthfulness and the relative importance of each misleading statement" (Jackson, 2008). We are similarly hesitant to draw strong conclusions about partisan differences from these data. This survey does not provide definitive evidence that rumors about Democrats were more prevalent since the statements we asked about were not randomly selected.

Questioning rumors

Many of the people who heard rumors about the candidates also encountered evidence contradicting those false knowledge claims. For example, the majority of people who heard the rumors that Obama is Muslim or that he is not a natural-born citizen also heard challenges to those rumors (Table 1). The suggestion that Obama wanted to change the national anthem, the least well know of the Obama rumors, was also the least challenged falsehood, with only about one in six (17%) of those who heard the rumor saying that they had encountered evidence to the contrary (3% of all respondents). The tendency for more widely known rumors to be more widely disputed is also evident when looking at the false statements about McCain and Palin. The most widely heard rumor about Palin (regarding book banning) was also the most widely challenged: about two of every five (39%) people who heard the rumor had also encountered evidence against the claims (15% of all respondents). In examining the factual statements, we find that there was virtually no push back on the claim regarding McCain's divorce and remarriage, with only one in 20 (5%) of those who heard the statement saying they'd heard evidence against it (2% of all respondents). The accurate statement about Biden, however, was met with slightly more resistance. Almost one in four (22%) of those who heard the claim said they had heard something suggesting that it was false (9% of all respondents).

Believing rumors

Next, we consider peoples' assessments of the rumors that they heard. Ideally, citizens should be able to sift through the information they encounter over the course of an election, sorting truth from fiction. As we noted in the beginning, the news media and a variety of independent organizations made substantial efforts to support this process, providing accurate information and timely fact checking.

Thus, there were sources that individuals could use to identify misinformation, if they believed those sources. How Americans evaluate knowledge claims, especially those that are patently false, has implications for our democracy. If citizens are unable to distinguish fact from rumor, then our collective ability to weigh choices and arrive at informed vote decisions is threatened.

We start with the good news: a large majority of Americans did not believe the rumors that we analyzed. The proportion who believed a rumor ranged from 22% to only 3%, with the level of belief in single digits for four of the eight rumors. For example, fewer than one in 15 (6%) believed that Obama wanted to change the national anthem, and less than one in 30 (3%) believed that McCain declared himself to be a war criminal. Moreover, the proportion of those who believed the rumors they heard was typically low. While fully 22% of the respondents indicated that they believed Obama is a Muslim, this is less than one in four of those who heard the rumor. Only slightly more than one in four of those who heard that Sarah Palin banned books believed it to be true.

However, there is sobering evidence in these data also. First, one might feel uneasy that as many as one in four do believe such rumors about Obama's religion or Palin's book banning, especially in light of the evidence to the contrary. And one-third or more of those who heard some of the other rumors believed them–nearly half believed that most of Obama's campaign donations came from wealthy foreigners and one-third of those who heard that Palin called dinosaurs "lizards of Satan" believed this to be true. Nor are the proportions of individuals who heard challenges to the rumors necessarily encouraging. For example, only half of those who heard that Obama could not legally hold the Presidency because he was not a natural-born citizen of the U.S. also reported hearing a challenge of this claim. Less than half of those who heard that Palin successfully banned books reported hearing a challenge of the claim, and less than one in four reported hearing a challenge to the claim about Palin's view of dinosaurs. Such data are not the stuff of a vigorous "marketplace of ideas" where truth will dispel falsehoods.

Uncertainty about these statements was also quite prevalent. When assessing a statement's accuracy during the survey, respondents could indicate that they simply hadn't thought much about the claim. About one in every four or five people who'd heard the Obama rumors responded in this way, and slightly more people were uncertain about the McCain/Palin rumors. This suggests that people were actually a bit worse at rejecting rumors then the number of people who believed them suggests. In several cases, people who believed a rumor outnumbered those who rejected it. For example,

almost twice as many people believed that Obama's campaign had substantial foreign funding as rejected it. And roughly equal numbers of people believed and disbelieved the assertion that Palin had banned books.

These survey results are not sufficient evidence on which to make claims about the relative susceptibility of the two groups of supporters to rumors. Although McCain supporters believed more rumors than Obama supporters, this appears to reflect the fact that there were more rumors about Obama in circulation, not necessarily that McCain supporters were more likely to believe them. Overall, both groups of supporters believed about 40% of the rumors they heard.

Turning to the factual statement, we again have cause for modest optimism. About 50% more people believed the statement about Biden than rejected it, and the believe-to-disbelieve ratio for the statement about McCain's divorce was 16 to 1. Although Americans may not have been as successful at identifying falsehoods as we might like, at least they were more likely to believe statements that were true than to believe those that were false. [1]

Campaign news continues to move online

The Internet was a prominent fixture in the election, regularly noted for its role in the Obama campaign's successful fundraising and supporter-mobilization efforts, and for its widespread use by interested voters. Some observers have also speculated that the Internet could be an important contributor to the spread of rumors. Before turning to this question specifically, we consider the prevalence of Internet-based communication about the election more generally. Our first observation is that getting campaign news online is a notably common practice (see Table 2). Almost two in three (64%) Americans got news regarding the 2008 campaign online; two in five (38%) did so with almost daily frequency. This is a marked increase from 2004 when just over one in four (27%) Americans said they got campaign news online (Horrigan, Garrett, & Resnick, 2004). Respondents' use of online sources in 2008 is quite similar to their use of radio (72% use, 43% use almost daily), but it continues to lag far behind television (96% use, 83% use almost daily).

[1] It is somewhat startling to realize that roughly equal numbers of Americans believed that Obama was Muslim as believed that Biden described paying higher taxes as patriotic. Nevertheless, this seems to say more about the widespread awareness of the rumor about Obama than it does about people's willingness to accept the claim.

Table 2. Americans' use of online sources for campaign news in 2008

Source	Use this source every day or almost every day	Used this source during 2008 election [a]
The Internet or World Wide Web	38%	64%
Email from friends and family	19	53
The website of a major national news organization, such as cnn.com, msnbc.com, or foxnews.com	22	49
Email from political candidates, parties, or other political groups	8	32
The website of a nonpartisan organization that summarizes or recommends news stories, such as Google News or Digg	7	29
A video sharing site, such as YouTube or Hulu	3	28
The website of a nonpartisan organization that provides voter information, such FactCheck.org or Project Vote Smart	2	19
The website of an independent political news organization, such as RealClearPolitics.com or Politico.com	4	15
The website of a politically conservative news organization or blog, such as NewsMax.com or Townhall.com	2	11
The website of a politically liberal news organization or blog, such as AlterNet.org or the DailyKos.com	1	7

Note: a. Includes use every day or almost every day. Rows can sum to more than 100%.

There were two particularly prevalent sources of campaign news online in 2008, representing two distinct way of getting information. First, almost half (49%) of all Americans utilized web sites associated with the major news organizations to keep up with the campaign. This reflects a technological update of a traditional approach to seeking information about the election, relying on established institutions for news content. In contrast to many other types of Web-based information sources, these outlets' reputation is not primarily defined by their online presence. For the organizations behind these services, the Internet is just one of several types of media used to disseminate news and information, and their high profile offline probably contributes to their success online.

Second, a comparable proportion of individuals (53%) reported that email from friends and family was a source of information during the 2008 campaign. This is up from 16% in December 2007, a striking three-fold increase in one year (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2008). We suspect that the rapid expansion is due in large part to increased interest in the campaign as Election Day drew near.

Whatever the reason, increasing interpersonal communication could have implications for the spread of rumors and the challenges to them, since personal contacts have historically been an important mechanism of rumor circulation.

These informal social networks based on friendship and familial bonds constitute a different relationship between the person sending campaign information and the person receiving it than in the relationship between a mainstream, "broadcast" publisher and the news reader. Information circulating via these channels often may be traced back to a mainstream source. For example, people may forward news stories that they consider important. Despite their sometimes common origins, however, it seems likely that news forwarded through interpersonal networks is viewed and evaluated differently than news that arrives through more formal channels. Forwarded news has at least the appearance of selectivity and relevance by virtue of having been evaluated by someone known to the receiver.

The pattern witnessed here is consistent with one of the classic findings of opinion research– that many individuals receive a significant share of their political information through a "two-step flow" process of communication, wherein another person identifies and communicates significant information to the recipient (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). What is notable and perhaps new about the data in Table 2 is that now the media over which the communication from significant others occurs is digital, not face to face. As might be expected, a large number of individuals (38%) reported that they utilized both friends/family and national news media as sources of online information during the campaign.

Third, a substantial proportion of individuals (32%) received online campaign information from political groups and the candidates themselves. This is indicative of the extent to which formal political organizations are now utilizing the internet as a means to reach a large population. There are some clear advantages to the sender of using such online communications, including lower expense per contact, capacity to customize specific messages to target groups, and the use of interactive technologies, and it is reasonable to predict that such online communications will become increasingly prevalent and important to formal campaign organizations.

Fourth, the most "democratic" modalities of the online world have also invaded the space of political campaigns. In particular, more than one in four Americans got campaign information from a video sharing site, such as Google's YouTube. As one might expect, younger people were the heaviest users of these new technologies, but it was not solely their domain. In fact, the average age of

individuals who reported getting campaign news from online video sites on a daily basis was 40 years old.

And fifth, the mix of non-partisan and partisan alternative news outlets also maintained sizable audiences, although none was used as an information source by more than about one-fifth of respondents. Non-partisan voter information sites, including the rumor checking site FactCheck.org and Project Vote Smart, were used by about one in five (19%), while independent (non-major) political news organizations such as RealClearPolitics.com were used by about one in six (15%). About one in seven people used a partisan news site from either side of the political spectrum, with slightly greater numbers of respondents utilizing conservative sites (11%, e.g., NewsMax.com) than liberal sites (7%, e.g., DailyKos.com).

Candidate preferences influence rumor acceptance

It has long been known that individuals are more willing to accept information that supports their beliefs as true than information that undermines those beliefs (see, for example, Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). We tend to trust evidence that our views are correct without much scrutiny, but we respond very differently to evidence that we are wrong. Thus, our processing of political information is shaped by our prior beliefs. We examine challenges to our views carefully, looking for problems with the data and errors in its interpretation; we critique the arguments made; and we construct counterarguments to defend our initial position.

Table 3. Average number of rumors heard, challenged, and believed, by level of political activity and candidate preference

	Average number of rumors about the Democratic ticket			Average number of rumors about the Republican ticket		
	Heard	Heard challenge [a]	Believed [a]	Heard	Heard challenge [a]	Believed [a]
All respondents	2.0	1.0	0.6	.8	.2	.2
Obama supporters	1.7	1.1	.2	.9	.3	.3
McCain supporters	2.5	.9	1.1	.7	.3	.2

Notes. Out of four rumors. a. Only asked of respondents who heard the rumor.

Splitting the rumors into two groups–rumors about Obama and rumors about McCain/Palin–we see that reactions to rumors in this election are no exception (see Table 3). Candidate support clearly affected the individual's response to rumors. Put simply, people were more familiar with rumors about the candidate they opposed, and were more likely to believe those rumors. This pattern is especially clear when comparing Obama and McCain supporters' beliefs surrounding rumors about the Democratic ticket. McCain supporters heard more rumors about Obama than Obama supporters did. And while supporters of both candidates were about as likely to have heard a challenge to a rumor about the Democrats, supporters of McCain were far more likely to believe the rumors about the Democrats than were Obama supporters. Although the rumors about the Republican ticket were much less well known, a similar pattern is evident. Respondents who supported Obama heard and believed more rumors about McCain and Palin than those who supported McCain. Given their small size, these differences could be due to chance, but the pattern is consistent with prior research.

Rumors online

There has been a growing concern that the Internet promotes the unchecked spread of rumors. The technology makes the circulation of information easy, fast, and cheap, allowing people to reach large audiences without the support of mainstream news organizations. Some scholars worry that without responsible gatekeepers that are accountable for vetting information before it is widely published, inaccuracies and falsehoods will become rampant. This concern is based on the assumption that some actors will be more able to spread rumors and lies, and that many people tend to be uncritical, or even gullible, when faced with new information. According to this argument, the Internet makes it more likely that some people will unquestioningly forward an interesting, provocative, or humorous story rather than to exhibit healthy skepticism, verifying the information before sharing it with others.

This view, however, can be countered by other important considerations. Not every rumor is compelling or believable, and studies have shown that most people do not spread uninteresting lies (unless they have a Machiavellian political agenda). A rumor is most likely to flourish if it appears to be reasonable explanation for a troubling concern or ambiguity faced by the person receiving it. Moreover, forwarding a rumor can be harmful to one's reputation if the falsehood is exposed. Although the Internet makes it easier to disseminate false information, it also opens the capacity to communicate challenges to a far wider array of actors. Whether using the Internet or the press, individuals pay a price

for circulating untruths. Those who are exposed risk being labeled a liar or a fool. In either case, they are less likely to find a trusting audience for their views in the future. Taken together, these factors suggest that the Internet might have a somewhat different influence on the circulation of rumors than has been feared. The ease and speed with which information circulates online is likely to promote rumor awareness, but given the equal facility to present and find challenging information, and the potentially harmful reputation effects of failing to do so, the technology might also promote exposure to fact-checking information.

The survey data provides some evidence for the latter view, in the sense that the use of online campaign news is associated with increased exposure both to the rumors *and* to the evidence that the rumors are false (see Table 4). Ultimately, online news use was associated with believing only slightly more rumors. A potential alternative explanation for this trend, however, is that politically active individuals may be more likely to go online for their campaign news than those who are less active. If this were the case, then the level of political activity, not use of new communication technology, would be the reason for the increase in rumor exposure. This is a legitimate concern considering that, as Table 4 shows, higher levels of political activity are associated with greater rumor exposure. Although only sample descriptives are reported here, we also tested the influence of online news consumption on rumor exposure and belief using regression analysis. Regression is a statistical technique that allows us to simultaneously account for the influence of other factors. Even after controlling for factors such as political interest, political knowledge, political activity, education and offline news use, online news use remains a significant predictor of rumor exposure.

Table 4. Average number of rumors heard, challenged and believed, by individual characteristic

	Heard	Heard challenge [a]	Believed [a]
All respondents	2.8 of 8	1.2 of 8	.8 of 8
Above average online news use [b]	3.2	1.6	1.0
Below average online news use	2.5	.9	.7
Above average political activity in past year	3.2	1.7	1.0
Below average political activity in past year	2.5	.9	.7

Notes. Out of eight rumors. a. Only asked of respondents who heard the rumor. b. An index based on use of several online news sources.

The final question, then, is whether online news use also reinforces people's tendency to be biased in their reception of political rumors. That is, are people who get their campaign information online more likely to hear and accept rumors that criticize their opponent than those who do not? The answer appears to be no (see Figures 1 and 2). People who get their news online are more familiar with rumors about both candidates, not just the one they support, and they are more likely to have heard the rumors on both sides challenged. For example, although heavy online news users who supported McCain heard more rumors about Obama than lighter users (as demonstrated by the upward slope on the solid line in the chart on the right in Figure 1), they were also more likely to have heard challenges to those rumors (shown by the upward slope on the line of closely spaced dashes in the same chart). The average number of rumors believed, however, remained fairly stable across the three levels of online news use (the almost horizontal line of wide dashes). Thus, online news does not appear to significantly promote political biased rumor beliefs.

Figure 1. Circulation of rumors about Democratic ticket, by candidate preference

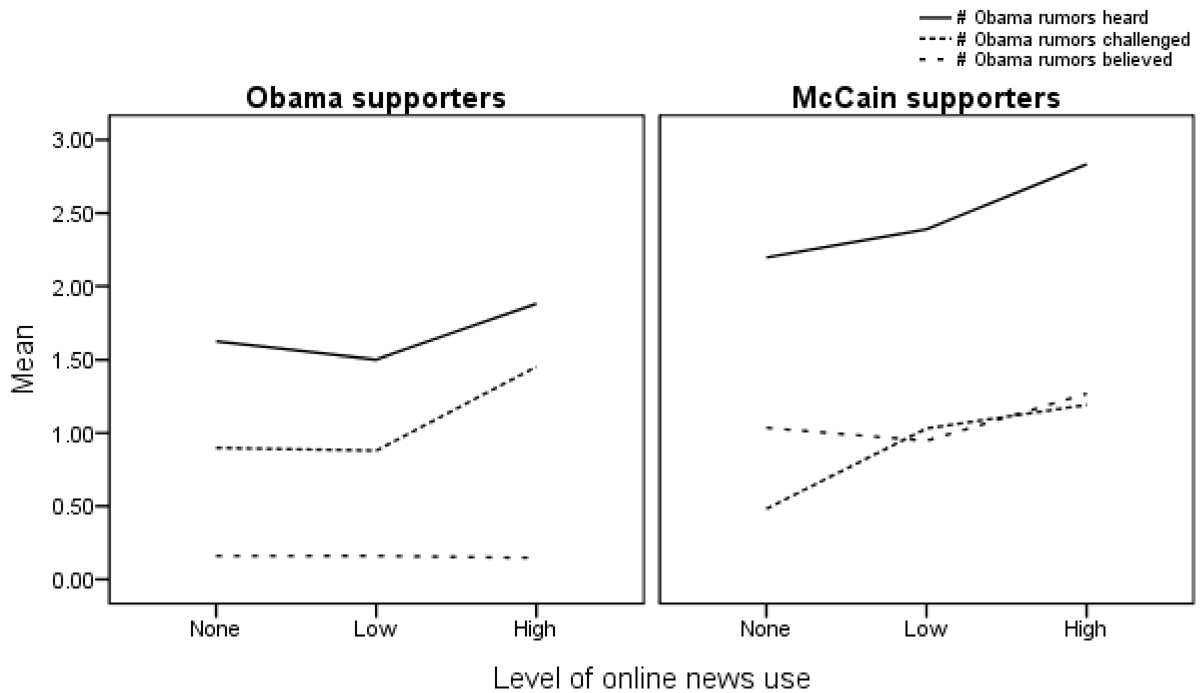
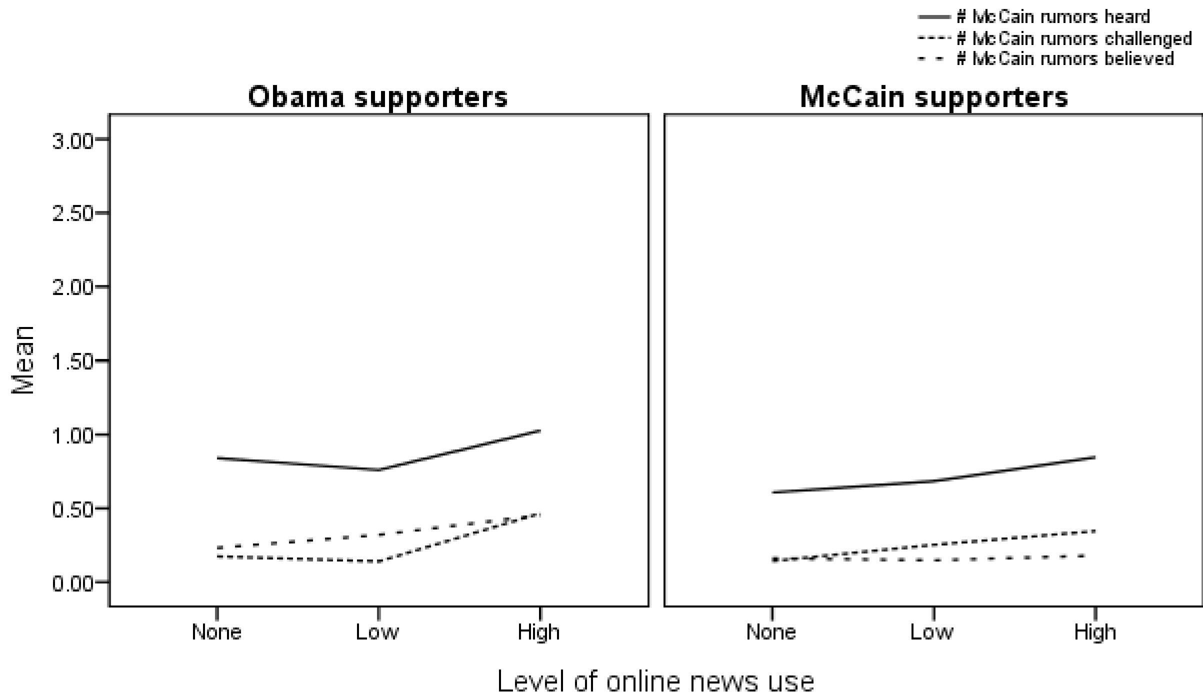


Figure 2. Circulation of rumors about Republican ticket, by candidate preference



Conclusions

This research was motivated by an interest in two aspects of the 2008 Presidential election cycle: (1) the extent to which individuals heard, heard challenges to, and believed rumors about the candidates; and (2) the extent to which the Internet was an important source of information during the campaign. Our analysis is based on a national survey of Americans who were asked about eight rumors that were spread during the campaign and about the role of the Internet in their information gathering during the campaign.

Survey results confirm that rumors had a notable presence in this campaign. First, of the eight rumors we examined, four had been heard by at least 40% of the respondents. One was known to fully nine out of ten citizens. However, the other four rumors were heard by only a small proportion of the people. Second, respondents were more likely to hear challenges to the accuracy of the rumors that were most widely circulated. Even so, typically less than half reported hearing a challenge to a particular rumor. Third, even when respondents heard a rumor challenged, usually at least a quarter of them still believed it to be true. And fourth, as might be expected, those who supported one ticket were more likely to believe rumors about candidates on the other party's ticket. This was especially clear

when looking at supporters of the Republican ticket, who were much more likely to believe rumors regarding Obama than were Democrats to believe rumors about McCain and Palin.

The survey also shows that increasing numbers of Americans turned to the Internet for campaign information in 2008. Reliance on online sources of political information has grown significantly since the last presidential election. In 2004, according to data collected by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, only about one in four Americans got campaign news online. By 2008 that number had nearly doubled: almost two in three people got campaign news online at least once in a while, and two in five said they got campaign news online almost daily. Secondly, online political information comes from a diverse array of sources that includes personal communications, major corporate news organizations, news summary services, online video sites, and other political outlets. This is particularly striking as many of these types of outlets did not exist just a decade ago. Furthermore, about half of the respondents reported receiving online campaign information from friends and family, suggesting that electronic communication has become a very important medium within informal social networks. And more than one in four Americans received information during the election from more populist sources, such as Google's YouTube.

Although news consumers' migration to online sources did influence the circulation of political rumors, this survey suggests that the Internet does not pose the kind of threat that some have imagined. The Internet, including email and the web, appears to have facilitated the spread of rumors: the more people got campaign news online, the more rumors they encountered. However, online news use also promoted contact with evidence that these rumors were false. Thus, the Internet is not a relentless political rumor mill; instead, it appears to be a rich and complicated campaign information space, where people encounter a mix of factual information and falsehoods. When people looked for accurate information about the candidates—and they often did—they could find it. To this point, the Internet has expanded the "marketplace of ideas" competing for attention and impact in the world of political discourse, and it is increasing its share of that marketplace. Ultimately, though, the technology appears to have had only a modest influence on what people believed.

Methods

The results reported here are based on a national representative telephone survey of 600 adults living in the continental US. The survey was conducted by Abt SRBI Inc., and interviews were conducted in English between November 6 and November 20. The margin of error for the complete data set is +/- 4.4% with 95% confidence. The random-digit dial (RDD) survey achieved a response rate of 26.2%, calculated using AAPOR method two and treating non-English speakers as ineligible.

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