

The Internet as Political Lie Detector

In a year of misleading political attack ads and distracted television newscasters, the Internet may offer salvation for voters seeking the truth.

A [new Google poll](#) found that 64 percent of battleground-state voters have used the Internet to fact-check the candidates in 2012.

They may have gone online after tuning out local television news, which has largely taken a pass on vetting the claims made in political ads they air. Two recent [Free Press studies](#) found that newscasters at stations in the most heavily saturated markets have failed to investigate the shadowy groups that place local political ads — or to question the content of the ads themselves.

[Free Press' study](#) of political ads in Milwaukee found that stations in May devoted 53 news segments to Justin Bieber while offering zero analysis of the groups behind political ads flooding local airwaves.

It's gotten so bad that [Edward Wasserman](#), dean of UC Berkeley's journalism school, wrote that the groups that buy TV ads "appear to have purchased not just airtime, but immunity from media scrutiny."

This wouldn't be a problem if these ads told the truth. But a survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Center for Responsive Politics found that [85 percent](#) of the money spent on presidential ads by the four top-spending third-party groups financed deceptive ads.

The Google poll suggests that for many the Internet is becoming a haven from television lies — a place where people can ask specific political questions and, in the best scenarios, search out correct answers. Aside from Google searches, there are many helpful sites for this, including FactCheck.org, Politifact.com and the wiki WeCheck.org.

But the Internet's usefulness as a resource shouldn't release local newscasts from their obligation to cover contentious political issues and call out those who use local airwaves to deceive.

Indeed, TV is where the fact-checking obligation should be the greatest. Most people cite television as their primary source for news and information, and most political speech still takes place on broadcast TV.

And while it's true that the Internet is increasing its share of the overall audience for news, television remains our most influential communications medium. A 2011 [Pew Research Center survey](#) found that more Americans report watching local TV than any other source for news — more than the number that rely on newspapers, radio or, even, the Internet.

For this reason, TV remains extremely popular with those trying to manipulate public opinion. Media analysts project that political ad buys will [exceed \\$3.3 billion](#) by Election Day. That figure [dwarves all estimates](#) of online political ad spending.

Perhaps that's why more people in battleground states are turning to the Internet in search of the truth.

But this online escape hatch is not available to all Americans. Fast, reliable broadband remains a luxury beyond the reach of many of those who live in rural and low-income communities.

According to the Commerce Department, 72 percent of Caucasians have Internet access at home, compared to only 55 percent of African Americans and 57 percent of Hispanic households. Only four out of every 10 households with incomes below \$25,000 and only 50 percent of rural residents have wired home Internet access.

Television access, on the other hand, is available in [97.1 percent](#) of U.S. households, according to Nielsen. (For more on this divide, read Deepak Bhargava and Helen Brunner's [excellent article in the *Hill*](#)).

Until we achieve universal and open Internet access in America, over-the-air television will remain the dominant force in politics.

And while the Internet may prove to be a useful lie detector in the 2012 elections, that's no excuse for stations that have ducked responsibility for political truth-telling.