Community and Civic Involvement

The analyses in this chapter examine how adults with different literacy levels participated in government and community affairs by voting, staying informed, and volunteering. The analyses in the chapter also examine the extent to which adults of different literacy levels participated in online communities through sending e-mail and using the Internet to find information.

Voting

Among U.S. citizens of voting age, the percentage of adults who voted in the 2000 presidential election was higher in each literacy level than in the next lower literacy level on the prose and document scales (figure 6–1). Approximately half of adult citizens with \textit{Below Basic} prose and document literacy reported voting in the 2000 presidential election compared with 84 percent of adult citizens with \textit{Proficient} prose and document literacy.
Sources of Information About Current Events, Public Affairs, and the Government

Adults can get information about current events, public affairs, and the government from printed and written sources, including newspapers, magazines, books and brochures, and the Internet. They can also get information from nonprint sources, including family, friends, or coworkers and radio and television.

Printed and Written Information

Many adults receive information about current events, public affairs, and the government from traditional printed sources such as newspapers, magazines, books, and brochures. Additionally, over the past decade, the Internet has become an increasingly important source of written information on these topics.

Comparisons across levels. Lower percentages of adults with Below Basic prose and document literacy than other adults reported reading any information about current events, public affairs, and the government in newspapers, magazines, books, or brochures or on the Internet14 (figure 6-2). Twenty-nine percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy reported obtaining no information about current events, public affairs, and the government from newspapers compared with 12 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, 8 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, and 7 percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy. Seventy-seven percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy reported that they received no information about these topics from the Internet compared with 53 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, 31 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, and 16 percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy.

Comparisons across sources of written information. Lower percentages of adults with Below Basic, Basic, and Intermediate prose literacy got information about current events, public affairs, and the government from the Internet than from other written sources. For adults with Proficient prose literacy, this gap did not exist; a higher percentage of adults with Proficient prose literacy got information about these topics from the Internet than from books or brochures, and there was no measurable difference in the percentages of adults with Proficient prose literacy who got information from the Internet and from magazines. Higher percentages of adults at all levels of prose literacy got written information about current events, public affairs, and the government from newspapers than from other written sources.

14 Document results are in appendix E.
Figure 6-2. Percentage of adults who got information about current events, public affairs, and the government from each of the following sources: newspapers, magazines, books or brochures, the Internet, by prose literacy level: 2003

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households. Adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (3 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.

Nonprint Information

Nonprint sources of information about current events, public affairs, and the government include family, friends, or coworkers and radio and television. A lower percentage of adults with Below Basic prose and document literacy than other adults obtained information about these topics from nonprint sources (figure 6-3).\textsuperscript{15} Twenty-one percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy reported getting no information about current events, public affairs, and the government from family, friends, or coworkers during the previous year compared with 10 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, 6 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, and 4 percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy. The differences were smaller or not statistically significant among adults at different literacy levels with regard to the amount of information about these topics they got from radio and television.

Volunteering

Volunteering—working in an unpaid capacity for a community group or an organization—is another way adults can participate in civic and community life. Adults may volunteer only occasionally, such as working at a fair in a school or making phone calls to raise funds for a nonprofit group, or they may volunteer regularly, such as coaching a community or church sports team or serving as an unpaid member of the board of a nonprofit organization.

\textsuperscript{15} Document results are in appendix C.
The percentages of adults who volunteered once a week or more were higher in each prose and document literacy level than in the next lower level (figure 6-4). Twenty-five percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy reported volunteering once a week or more during the previous year compared with 20 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, 15 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, and 10 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy. Conversely, higher percentages of adults with lower levels of literacy than adults with higher levels of literacy reported that they did not volunteer at all during the previous year. Eighty-three percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy did not volunteer during the previous year compared with 69 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, 55 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, and 43 percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy.

**Online Communities**

Communicating with neighbors and other individuals in a community on issues of common interest and concern has traditionally been a key aspect of community involvement. These types of communications have increasingly been conducted on the Internet and through e-mail, making it easier for online communities to develop among people who share common interests and concerns. Higher percentages of adults with high levels of prose and document literacy than adults with lower levels of literacy sent and received e-mail or used the Internet, two activities generally required for participating in online communities (figures 6-5 and 6-6).

Eighty percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy reported that in the year prior to the 2003...
assessment, they did not send or receive any e-mail compared with 52 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, 24 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, and 8 percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy (figure 6-5). Sixty-seven percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy reported sending or receiving an e-mail message at least once a day compared with 48 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, 24 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, and 8 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy.

Additionally, lower percentages of adults with low levels of prose and document literacy than adults with higher levels of literacy used the Internet (figures 6-5 and 6-6). Seventy-seven percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy did not use the Internet in the year prior to the 2003 adult literacy assessment compared with 46 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, 20 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, and 6 percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy (figure 6-5). Almost half of adults with Proficient prose literacy used the Internet every day in the year prior to the 2003 adult literacy assessment compared with 35 percent of adults with Intermediate prose literacy, 20 percent of adults with Basic prose literacy, and 7 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy (figure 6-6).

**Summary**

This chapter examined how American adults with different levels of prose and document literacy participated in community and civic affairs.

Among U.S. citizens of voting age, the percentage of adults who voted in the 2000 presidential election was higher in each prose and document literacy level than in the next lower level.

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**Figure 6-5. Percentage of adults who sent or received e-mail messages and found information on the Internet, by prose literacy level: 2003**

![Graph showing percentage of adults who sent or received e-mail messages and found information on the Internet, by prose literacy level: 2003.](image)

*NOTE:* Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households. Adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (3 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.

Lower percentages of adults with low levels of prose and document literacy than adults with higher levels of literacy obtained information about current events, public affairs, and the government from a variety of print and nonprint sources. Lower percentages of adults with Below Basic prose and document literacy than other adults reported reading any information about current events, public affairs, and the government in newspapers, magazines, books, or brochures or on the Internet; they were also less likely to obtain information about these topics from nonprint sources, including family members, friends, or coworkers and radio and television. Additionally, lower percentages of adults with Below Basic, Basic, or Intermediate levels of prose literacy got information about current events, public affairs, and the government from the Internet than from other written sources. There was no measurable differences in the percentages of adults with Proficient prose literacy who got information from the Internet and magazines, and a higher percentage of adults with Proficient prose literacy got information from the Internet than from books or brochures.

Adults with higher levels of prose and document literacy volunteered more frequently than adults with lower levels of literacy: the percentage of adults who volunteered once a week or more during the previous year was higher at each increasing level of literacy. Adults with higher levels of prose and document literacy were also more likely to send and receive e-mail or use the Internet—two activities generally required for participating in online communities.

Figure 6-6. Percentage of adults who sent or received e-mail messages and found information on the Internet, by document literacy level: 2003

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households. Adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (3 percent in 2003) are excluded from the figure.
Figure 6-7. Percentage of adults who sent or received e-mail messages and found information on the Internet, by quantitative literacy level: 2003

NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households. Adults who could not be interviewed because of language spoken or cognitive or mental disabilities (3 percent in 2003) are excluded from this figure.