Abstract: Andrew PERRIN

*Letters to the Editor: demographic and cultural contours of a mediated public sphere*

Many citizens seek to enact a form of public sphere by writing letters to the editor to local newspapers. The letters columns constitute local mediated public spheres. Using a unique dataset of all letters received by one metropolitan newspaper and a survey of letter writers and nonwriting subscribers, the paper analyzes the argumentative style of letters and the demographic characteristics of writers. Writers are more likely to be white, male, older, more politically active, and more liberal than the local population. Hypotheses tested about letter-writing among newspaper readers confirm that social inequalities and political engagement influence participation in this public sphere. Hypotheses about argumentative tone in letters confirm key effects of gender differences and sense of local political efficacy.

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