



# Participatory democracy and the value of online community networks: An exploration of online and offline communities engaged in civil society and political activity<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the widely debated question of whether online communication through the Internet will fulfill its potential to enhance democratic processes in society. The paper reports the findings of a survey of groups engaged in some form of civic activity, in both online and offline groups. Comparisons are drawn between the responses of those engaged in both types of group to determine whether the motivations, behavior, and satisfaction of participants differ because of the medium of communication. Contrary to some expectations in the literature, the findings suggest that participants in online groups are marginally less satisfied with their participation in their group. The findings have implications for politicians, policy makers, and groups engaged in civil society when using online channels of communication for democratic discourse.

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## 1. Introduction

As government agencies have increasingly begun to use ICTs for communication with citizens, opportunities for online consultation and for participation by citizens in policy development have also increased. These developments have raised a number of questions concerning the nature of citizens' participation in civil society, and whether the use of ICTs might arrest or reverse an apparent decline in citizens' public engagement, as observed for example, by Putnam (2000). This raises the issue of what makes good participation for citizens, and whether these conditions can be created in the online environment. A previous paper by the same authors outlined a number of examples where attempts by government agencies to use online consultation highlighted the potential for online consultation to provide a vibrant medium for extending the reach of the consultative process (Sommer & Cullen, 2009); at the same time, each of these examples revealed shortcomings in the new online channel, reinforcing the need to further investigate the value and potential of ICTs and online channels in citizen-government consultation, and in civil society generally.

The objective of this study is therefore to investigate the impact that ICTs may have as a communications channel, and in supporting online networking, on citizens' participation in civic activity, and/or their participation in consultative processes with government.

The research questions are defined as:

- What motivates people to participate in some form of political or civic activity, such as responding to requests for submissions, participating in a consultation process seeking citizens' views, or

offering their views on specific issues to politicians and government agencies?

- When citizens participate in discussions of social and political issues, are there differences between participating online (i.e. email, web-based submission, online networks, and/or discussion groups) and more traditional ways of participating (letter-writing, making personal presentations, telephone campaigns, and/or meeting face-to-face in a lobby or activist group)?
- What satisfaction do people get from participating in these processes, and do motivations and rewards vary and barriers differ in these various channels?

## 2. Literature review

In a seminal study in 1998, Norris and Jones found that the Internet could have a positive impact and that the Internet could promote civic engagement because of its ability to foster virtual communities, enable users to coordinate their activities, and share information in support of common concerns (Norris & Jones, 1998). However, their findings suggested that a subset of Internet users – identified as 'researchers' – who used the Internet for email and research, were more politically knowledgeable and therefore more likely to use the Internet for political activity, and were more likely to become politically engaged as a result of venturing online than the other three categories identified.<sup>1</sup> As Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) note, although Norris and Jones use data from 1995 when use of the Internet was still very limited, "these distinctions are highly suggestive of emerging patterns of new media use" (p. 144). Findings

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<sup>1</sup> These are: 'consumers', who use the Internet for shopping online and as a financial and travel resource; 'expressives', who use chat rooms and bulletin boards to share their views; 'party animals' who go online to play games and be entertained.

from the Pew Internet & American Life Project suggest that as use of the Internet matures, social networking, gaming, and shopping remain at a high level, while 59% of American voters had participated in some form of online engagement during the 2008 Presidential campaign (Horrigan, 2008; Lenhart, 2009; Lenhart, Jones, & McGill, 2008; Smith, 2008). A high percentage (62%) of Obama supporters expected to maintain their online engagement in some way, at least for the initial period of Obama's incumbency (Smith, 2008).

The problem of lack of engagement in civil society has been documented for some time, although some scholars continue to believe that the Internet offers significant opportunities to rekindle public engagement. Using data from an Internet-based survey conducted in 1998, Weber, Loumakis and Bergman found a high level of correlation between Internet engagement and civic and political engagement amongst respondents, while noting that "the Internet appears to exacerbate the socioeconomic bias already exhibited by civic and political participation" (Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003, p. 39), and therefore may simply 'turn up the volume' of those voices which are already being heard. Albrecht also identifies socio-economic factors as a major determinant in "Whose voice is heard in the political sphere?", a study that analyzes contributions to an online forum debating local issues related to the city of Hamburg (Albrecht, 2003). More encouragingly, however, representation was increased beyond those who traditionally participate in such debates; although representation of the elderly was diminished, participation by youth was larger than would be expected. Experience in the use of the Internet still had a significant impact on who participated, indicating that, while the Internet empowers some who might not otherwise have the time, energy, or will for public engagement, it excludes others.

There is also evidence from a more recent UK study that Web-based participation tools do enable and encourage more people to 'have their say' (Whyte, Macintosh, & Shall, 2006). The same study found that there is a significant public appetite to influence local decision-making, and that Web or Internet-based tools provide a convenient opportunity for people to have their views heard, provided those views are responded to. Set alongside this new opportunity, however, is a body of literature that suggests that discussion in the online environment can be more heated, and aggressive, and that in the anonymity afforded by the Internet, extreme views can be intruded into otherwise civil political discourse, views that might be considered anti-democratic. As Papacharissi observes, this tendency can limit the democratic potential of online discussions and undermine the Internet's ability to revive Habermas' *public sphere* (Habermas, 1989). Not only can intemperate discourse deter users from engaging online, it can deter politicians from paying heed to such forums. As Papacharissi further notes,

Internet technologies do indeed offer the opportunity to communicate across geographic borders and propose new avenues of political change, although the democratizing potential of these technologies frequently rests with the political infrastructure that is in place and the individual predisposition to be politically active (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 268)

Given the high Internet usage rates present among young people for social networking, Stephen Coleman, in carrying out research for the Carnegie Young People Initiative, investigated whether online communication might influence a perceived lack of involvement of youth in politics and the democratic process, asking: Can the Internet make an impact on this, given the high use of the Internet by young people? How disengaged are youth, and what would be needed to make them engaged? Coleman's findings suggest that:

- Youth reflect changes in society — people are becoming more selective about their role as citizens;

- Youth are "consumerist" in their approach to both politics and the Internet;
- Youth make heavy use of peer-to-peer networks to exchange views, and like to be listened to;
- Youth "re-order and re-construct" elements of civic life to meet their own needs.

The study concludes that it is the political institution that is disconnected from young people, not the other way around, and that youth continue to be interested in new forms of participation (demonstration, petitions, boycotting products). It suggests that those designing political activity aimed at young people must take their needs into account, make relevant information targeted at them easier to find, and make the information easier for them to understand. Most importantly, the study suggests that websites promoting the political engagement of youth must provide for bi-directional interaction, not just one-way information, and that mechanisms for moderation and response must be incorporated into youth websites focused on political and civic engagement (Coleman & Rowe, 2005).

Andrew Chadwick also discusses issues that have an impact on citizen participation in a chapter in his influential monograph, *Internet Politics* (Chadwick, 2006). Observing that "e-democracy produces more complex rather than just more or less community deliberation, and political participation" (p.113), Chadwick's questions focus on issues such as:

- Do virtual communities help or hinder democratic politics?
- Will the Internet help people to be active citizens?
- Can electronic discussion boards etc. provide deliberative public spheres?
- How useful are the concepts of social capital and the public sphere for interpreting the Internet's impact on democratic politics.

These questions should also inform research investigating the effectiveness of both physical and electronic channels for participation and debate within civic society.

The discussion of participation in civic society inevitably includes the concept of 'social capital' — the value the individual gains from participating in social activity and social networks, activities that Putnam and others categorize as either 'bridging' (inclusive behavior), or 'bonding' (exclusive behavior) (Putnam, 2000). Putnam defines social capital in terms of both public and private good (with externalities), as a form of 'generalized reciprocity'. Since the advent of the Internet, with the ease of communication it brings to many and the increase in communication between individuals and amongst groups, the question has been raised, to what extent does the Internet build social capital? And to what extent does its fostering of participation in civil society, if it indeed does foster this, add further social capital? This is also an issue worth addressing.

### 3. Methodology

The investigation was carried out in a number of communities engaged in civic activity in New Zealand, using a range of media to carry out their activities, both on and offline. The survey instrument was delivered to groups physically, or sent to them through their online community. A range of groups were contacted, from political to environmental, groups concerned with local issues, youth, and charitable groups.

The survey was developed to focus on issues raised by the work of Chadwick, Coleman, etc., as outlined above, and other related issues such as: What factors affect participation in civic activity? What knowledge and use of ICTS in other activities (including Trademe,<sup>2</sup> MySpace etc.) do online and offline participants have? Do the

<sup>2</sup> The New Zealand version of E-Bay.

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