National Institute for Civil Discourse Research Brief No. 3: New Media Usage and Civic Engagement (2)[1]

Key Issues

Are there disparities in who has access to opportunities for civic and political engagement through new media? How has new media usage contributed to an ongoing shift in the meaning and experience of citizenship and civic engagement?

Overview

Traditionally, there have been marked disparities in political and civic engagement by age, race and gender. In addition, those with less education and income have been less engaged in many civic and political activities. Some worried that new media, including e-mail, texting, online discussion groups, social-networking sites and blogs, would reflect or exacerbate these traditional disparities, whereas others hoped that the Internet would help level the civic and political playing field. Recent findings are mixed. Numerous studies show continued group disparities in levels of Internet access and use, but others show a narrowing of at least some of the traditional disparities. There is substantial evidence that use of political blogs is highly socially stratified. But there also is evidence that the divides seen in Internet use for civic or political purposes may be narrowing and that, as access to the digital world becomes nearer to ubiquitous, the Internet's potential to facilitate more inclusive political and civic engagement is beginning to be realized. The best evidence for this comes from studies showing that, while the Internet clearly does further the political and civic engagement of those already engaged, *as long as Internet access itself is high and inclusive,* the Internet can also have the longer term effect of enhancing the engagement of those who have traditionally been less engaged, both offline and online.

Research suggests that new media use is both an expression of, and a vehicle for, an emerging shift in what it means to be an engaged citizen. For example, young people in particular are using new media in ways that reflect and construct new forms of engagement that do not necessarily fit the mold of our traditional concepts and measures. Research calls into question the fear of declining civic engagement. When young people's engagement is assessed using traditional concepts and measures, youth will appear disengaged when in fact they are shifting to new forms of engagement. By traditional measures, youth's "civic" or "community" engagement is actually relatively high, whereas "political" engagement of youth is relatively low. But some research taking into account online means of engagement shows that engaging in *nonpolitical* participatory cultures online can serve as a "gateway" to *political* engagement.

Arguments and Findings

Traditionally, differences in income, education, age, race and gender were associated with disparities in civic and political engagement.[2] Prior to the Internet of course, civic and political engagement could only happen offline. By the 1990s, some researchers wondered whether the advent of the Internet could help overcome barriers to civic and political engagement for those with less income, education and social status. Others feared that, rather than leveling the civic and political playing field, new media would reflect or exacerbate the traditional disparities.[3]

In her influential 2001 book *The Digital Divide,*[4] Pippa Norris drew on multiple databases, including representative surveys for the United States and the European Union that contained information on social background, political attitudes, and other characteristics of Internet users. She compared these with the characteristics of national general populations. Internet use was clearly divided along socio-economic, race, gender and other lines; because of this, Norris argued that the Internet's rise and increasing importance in civic and political life would lead to growing inequality in civic and political participation: "[D]igital politics functions mainly to engage the engaged."[5]

Recent studies of the United States continue to show disparities in Internet access and use.

- A 2009 Pew Internet and American Life report showed that income is still a strong predictor of whether one has Internet access in the home.[6]
- A 2008 study showed that age is the strongest predictor of online use, followed by income and education. Race is also a substantial predictor, holding constant education and income.[7]

But:

- The same 2008 study, in contrast to earlier studies showing gender differences, found that men and women differed little in their Internet access and total usage. In fact, some categories of women – African American, less-educated and older women – *surpassed* their male counterparts in total online access and use.[8]

Much attention is now on whether or not there is what is termed the "second-level" or "usage" divide – differences in if and how people use the Internet specifically for civic and political purposes.[9] Again, the gender gap in general Internet use in the United States has closed and gaps in such use by income, education and race are narrowing. **But substantial differences in who uses the Internet to access or share information or opinions about *political* issues persist.**

- A 2010 study found that among users of the Internet for political purposes, males, the more educated and those of greater income were more dominant than was the case among those who used the Internet for non-political purposes.[10]
- A 2009 study concluded that online political activity is just as unequal by demographic characteristics as is offline political activity.[11]
- A 2008 analysis of General Social Survey data on new media use and voting in the 2000 Presidential election found that, among Internet Users, education and income were strong predictors of actively seeking political information online. In turn, those who sought such information online were more likely to vote.[12]
- A 2008 nationwide telephone survey found that those with higher education levels were more likely to use the Internet for "capital-enhancing" purposes, including gathering not just political information but also financial and health information and career advancement opportunities.[13]
- A survey of a random sample of participants in the Minnesota E-Democracy program, a program that helps citizens stay politically informed and engaged through the Internet, found that the E-Democracy participants had higher levels of income and education, and were much more active in traditional forms of political involvement compared to the general Minnesota population.[14]

A number of studies have looked at usage of blogs, especially political blogs, so that we now know something about the typical blog reader. For example:

- A 2007 web survey of web users at two points in time found that blog readers were more likely to be male than female, to have greater education and income and to be more politically involved than were non-readers.[15]
- A 2009 survey of people who reported reading political blogs at least several times a month suggested that blogs allow new forms of expression and engagement primarily for those who already are politically informed and engaged. The typical regular blog reader in this study was a college educated, middle-class, married, white male. The author of the study also noted that bloggers themselves are more likely to be male than female.[16]
- A 2010 survey of visitors to 40 of the 154 most popular political blog sites found that of the several thousand visitors who completed the survey, 73.8 percent were men and 26.2 percent were women. About 90 percent of those who completed the survey were white, the median

educational level was some graduate education, and the median annual household income range was $80,000–$100,000. We cannot be sure whether the reported disparities are more reflective of demographic differences in the whole range of those who frequented political blogs, or whether at least some of the disparities reflect instead differences by demographic background in which political blog consumers chose to fill out the survey.[17]

- A 2004 study found that 89.3 percent of blog readers were white, 76.5 percent were male, 92.6 percent had at least some college education, and 41.8 percent earned more than $65,001 per year.[18]

In addition:

- A 2005 study found that 70.8 percent of the bloggers on the most popular blog sites (as determined by the blog ranking site Popdex) were male.[19]
- A 2010 study analyzing the worldwide peer-production and sharing of videos on a mobile video sharing website called Qik found that there was a stark gender divide among those who posted videos with civic relevance. Only a small minority of producers of civic videos identified as women in their profiles.[20]

In sum**, there is substantial evidence that use of political blogs and other digital media for political and civic purposes remains highly stratified**. Even social networking sites exhibit divisions in usage, with implications for who is involved in new forms of civic engagement.

- A 2009 telephone survey of young adults found that, while greater use of Facebook was associated with greater civic engagement and greater political knowledge, greater MySpace use was not associated with civic engagement and was associated with diminished political knowledge.[21]
- Findings of this 2009 survey could not be explained by the demographic differences between the two sites' users, although these differences were profound, with MySpace's membership significantly less educated, less white and less male than Facebook's membership.[22]

However, at the same time**, there are new studies that show some narrowing of the "second-level" divide, especially with regard to traditional differences in engagement by age but also with respect to other demographic characteristics.** Whereas young adults typically are less engaged politically than are other age groups based on measures like traditional news consumption, community or political group membership and voting,[23] **the evidence suggests that new media are engaging greater numbers of young people in politics, and that new media usage by the young may help mitigate traditional racial divides in political and civic engagement.**

- A 2010 study that randomly sampled video questions submitted by ordinary citizens in the historic CNN-YouTube debates during the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election found that groups traditionally underrepresented in political processes and public discussion, especially young adults, were better represented than they are in more traditional forums. However, a gender gap persisted with roughly two males submitting a video for every female.[24]
- A 2009 study concluded that younger users of social networking sites are more likely than the sites' older users to use these sites for political purposes. This provides hope that, over time, the popularity of social networking sites can help overcome the current under-representation of young people in online political engagement.[25]
- A 2010 study that collected data at multiple time points from youthful respondents (12-17 years old), found that African-American youth were more likely than white youth to participate politically online as well as offline, and also were more likely to engage in "political consumerism" and follow, talk about, and express interest in the news.[26]

There is also evidence based on representative surveys to suggest that other divides in political or civic Internet use may be narrowing and that **new media may in fact be helping to make important aspects of political and civic participation more inclusive.**

- A 2009 study found that income and education gaps between those who use social networking sites to access or share political information and opinions and those who use social networking sites but not in political ways were much narrower than were income and education gaps between those who use the Internet more generally for political vs. non-political purposes.[27]
- A recent report from the Pew Internet and American Life project found no significant racial differences in the percentage of online social networking site users who used these sites for political purposes.[28]
- A 2007 telephone survey of a large number of U.S. adults selected through random digit dialing found that although males, whites, and those with more education, income, and years in their neighborhoods reported more offline local political engagement, none of these demographic characteristics was related to online local political engagement. Researchers measured offline local political engagement by whether the respondent or another household member attended a local public meeting or contacted a local public official on the telephone, in person, or in writing. Researchers measured online local political engagement by whether the respondent or another household member contacted a local government public official online, got information about public meetings online and/or participated in an online political discussion about local issues.[29]

Adding to a more optimistic evaluation of online media's potential for inclusiveness:

- A 2010 study found that even extremely disadvantaged communities can experience increases in social ties and civic engagement through Internet use.[30]
- A 2008 study that spent three years following how citizens and local governments used the Internet in a small community with high levels of Internet access found that not only did the Internet increase political engagement of those who were politically active at the start of the study, but Internet use also increased political engagement among those who were not politically active at the start.[31]

These two studies suggest that, while the Internet clearly does further the political and civic engagement of those already engaged, **as long as Internet access itself is high and inclusive, the Internet can also have the longer term effect of enhancing the engagement of those who have traditionally been less engaged, both offline and online.** Taking into account all of the studies and evidence amassed to this point, we have a somewhat mixed picture and we cannot be sure which of the many research differences—in for example, research design, sampling, information included and excluded, measures and analytic methods—may account for the fact that not all studies point in the same direction. Still—and despite the fact that considerable differences in new media usage for civic and political purposes continue to exist among various groups—there is some reason to believe that as the Internet and new media are becoming closer to ubiquitous, their potential to facilitate more inclusive political and civic engagement is beginning to be realized.

At the same time, **research suggests that new media are both an expression of and vehicle for an emerging redefinition of what it means to be an engaged citizen.**

- Statistical studies show that young people are much more likely to volunteer than are other age groups, but are much less likely to vote or to read or watch the news.[32]
- A 2007 in-depth, interview-based study of youth may help explain this pattern. The study found that young people valued "doing something" such as volunteering over voting, and valued action over talk.[33]

Thus, if young people's engagement is assessed with traditional concepts and measures, youth will appear disengaged when in fact they are shifting to new forms of engagement.[34] By some measures then, **youth's "civic" or "community" engagement is actually relatively high, whereas traditional "political" engagement of youth is relatively low.**

Reminding us that the idea of citizenship has varied historically, Zizi Papachrissi has suggested that a convergence of digital technologies, spaces and practices are today creating a new definition of citizenship.[35] Lindsey Pettingell argued that traditional models of civic engagement, epitomized by sustained membership in organizations serving the common good, do not reflect the reality of young people's lives. She suggested that the youth participatory culture surrounding digital media, including producing and sharing content on YouTube, blogs, and social networking sites, should be seen as a site of civic and political engagement.[36]

These arguments converge with those of Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport in their thought-provoking 2011 book *Digitally Enabled Change: Activism in the Internet Age*.[37] Examining social movement activism across the conservative-liberal spectrum in American politics, Earl and Kimport suggest that, because new media reduce the costs of social movement mobilization and of individuals' participation in social movements, the standard organizational form is becoming less important to social movement activism. To the extent that this finding of diminished importance for standard organizations signals a "paradigm shift" in how organized movements operate, it could likewise signal a broader shift in the types and meaning of individuals' civic and political engagement.

Recognizing that there are multiple ways of enacting citizenship and "doing democracy," Peter Dahlgren advocated for adopting a "civic *cultures*," framework "anchor[ed] at the level of citizens' lived experiences, personal resources and subjective dispositions."[38] Further:

> [T]his frame is…interested in the processes of becoming—how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as members of and potential participants in societal development…[T]he role of citizens…can have non- or pre-political aspects, but…may develop toward politics and indeed evolve into formalized politics. The key here is to underscore the processual and contextual dimension: The political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed.[39]

Support for Dahlgren's perspective comes from a large 2011 study of individuals surveyed at two points in time, which found that engaging in *nonpolitical* participatory cultures online can serve as a "gateway" to *political* engagement.[40] There is much discussion about a new flexibility in the private-public boundary, between politics and everyday life, and especially between politics and consumerism.

- A 2006 study found that more than half of young people reported engaging in "consumer activism" and that such activism came in individualized rather than coordinated ways, but also that activists saw what they were doing as a political act.[41]
- A 2008 study concluded: "Perhaps interactive digital media is not only taking us beyond traditional campaign politics, but also is playing an important role in casting ourselves as citizen consumers—a type of 'life politics'…that blurs the line between civic duty and consumer self-interest."[42]

In 2010, Papachrissi argued that the newly emerging notion of citizenship is consumption-based, leading to a vibrant but fragmented citizen sphere, in which people use media in an increasingly personalized, private way that is nonetheless also made public. Examples include posting a video to YouTube or sharing thoughts or opinions on a social networking site.[43] Papachrissi explained that "citizens feel more powerful in negotiating their place in democracy via the nexus of the private sphere."[44]

In sum, **prevailing arguments about a paradigm shift suggest a new focus on *how* people, especially young people, are using new media in ways that reflect and construct new forms of engagement.** As a result, emerging civic and political identities may not necessarily fit the mold of our traditional concepts and measures**.** While older concepts and measures remain relevant, young people especially may engage in multiple types of online activities that blur the traditional public-private boundary, at the same time as their nonpolitical participatory cultures online serve as gateways to some forms of political engagement.

[1] Robin Stryker, Department of Sociology and Director of Research, National Institute for Civil Discourse, and Heidi Reynolds-Stenson, Department of Sociology, both of The University of Arizona, prepared this brief (July 29, 2011).

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[4] Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[5] Norris 2001, *supra* n. 4, p. 22.

[6] Smith et al 2009, *supra* n. 2.

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[10] Min 2010, *supra* n. 9.

[11] Smith et al. 2009, *supra* n. 2.

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