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

Key Issues
Is the advent of new media associated with increased or decreased civic engagement?
Does use of new media produce civic engagement, or is the reverse true? Or is there a reciprocal relationship between the two?

Overview

As the Internet began to take hold, some commentators argued that the Internet could reverse anticipated declines in civic engagement, while others worried that the Internet would destroy what little civic engagement was left. Research on new media and civic engagement defines civic engagement in various ways, often using the terms "civic engagement" and "political engagement" interchangeably. Use of new media is sometimes measured by general Internet use, sometimes by Internet use for political purposes, and sometimes by participation in particular online forums such as political discussion groups, social networking sites or blogs. Research findings are mixed, but the weight of the evidence suggests that using new media, especially for political purposes, is associated with greater civic and political engagement along various dimensions. However, it remains unclear whether new media use *produces* civic and political engagement. The relationship between the two may be reciprocal, with use of new media enhancing at least some forms of civic and political engagement and civic and political engagement, in turn, enhancing at least some types of new media use. Research suggests that incipient fears that the Internet would diminish civic and political engagement – common in the early years of the Internet, and most famously asserted by Robert Putman in his well-known book *Bowling Alone*[2] – were overblown.

Arguments and Findings

Early speculation about how the Internet would affect civic and political engagement reflected "polarities of utopia and dystopia,"[3] with some arguing that the Internet could reverse presumed declines in civic engagement and others worrying that the Internet would destroy what little civic engagement was left. The term civic engagement is broad. It often is used to refer to specifically *political activities*, including political interest, political knowledge, political campaigning, voting, trust in political leaders, political group membership, political group discussion and mobilization, including political donations and petition signing both offline and online, and to *non-political activities* such as non-political community-group and voluntary-organization membership and activities, volunteering, and trust in fellow citizens. The conceptualization of "new media" shifts considerably across research studies. At times it is measured by general Internet use, at times by use of the Internet for specifically political purposes, and at times by focusing on particular online forums such as political discussion groups, social-networking sites, or blogs.

Research findings are mixed, but the weight of the evidence suggests that using new media, especially for political purposes, is associated with greater civic and political engagement along various dimensions. However, it is difficult to tease out cause and effect as well as to make certain that we have considered all other factors – for example, age, education and income – that are also known to be associated with the use of new media and with civic and political engagement. Thus, it remains unclear whether use of new media produces civic and political engagement.

Many studies find that those who use new media are also more engaged along at least *some* aspects of civic and political engagement.

- A 2009 study using data collected by the Pew Research Center's 2004 "Post-Election Internet Tracking Survey" showed that those who read blogs more frequently also participated in more online political discussion, online political campaigning, and online political donations or petition signing, holding constant various demographic factors. But there was no relationship seen between blog use and political participation offline.[4]
- A 2005 study based on data collected on the same individuals at two points in time found that using online media encouraged both online political discussion and sharing civic information with others online. These in turn influenced offline volunteering, working on a community project, working on behalf of a social group or cause, or attending a club, community or neighborhood meeting.[5]
- A 2010 study examining visitor surveys on 40 of the 154 most popular political blogs (as ranked by the rating site Blogpulse) found that those who expressed views on political blogs by posting or commenting more frequently also had higher scores on an 11-point scale of offline political participation. The scale included frequency (in the year before the survey) of working for a political candidate or party, giving money to a political campaign and attending a political meeting, rally or speech.[6]
- A 2011 study of data from the 2008 Pew Post-Election Tracking Center survey found that those who accessed political content on social networking sites also were far more likely to vote.[7]
- A 2006 study analyzing information from a 2002 telephone survey in Clarksville, Tennessee found that those who spent more time reading the newspaper and watching public affairs on television also reported more participation in politics, indicated by attempts to influence elections, public policy decisions or policy implementation. But greater use of new and of old media failed to translate into enhanced *civic participation*, such as working on community projects or addressing community concerns outside of government or elections.[8]

Additional studies suggest that whether those who use new media more often *also* are more involved in civic and political life, may depend not just on the type of civic or political participation examined but also *on the specific type of new media use*.

- A 2010 web-based survey of students in a large university examined relationships among, on one hand, attention to traditional online news sources, social media (such as Facebook) and online expression, and on the other hand, situational political involvement and sense of political self-efficacy. Those who attended more to traditional online resources also reported an increased situational political involvement and sense of political self-efficacy. But increased attention to social media was unrelated to both political involvement and political self-efficacy. Enhanced online expression increased political involvement but not efficacy.[9]
- An in-press (2011) study examining data collected in 2008 in coordination with the Pew Internet and American Life project found that social media may be better at fostering *civic* engagement – including membership in community, religious or other organizations and doing favors for neighbors – than are other new media types such as e-mail and mobile telephones. This is because social media allow people to expand their networks beyond a core group of people and to enhance the overall diversity of their networks.[10]

If diverse new media forms and practices have different effects, as these studies suggest, then **treating new media as a single category is unwise.** As well, some types of new media use themselves qualify as civic or political engagement, and asking whether and how *online* engagement relates to *offline* engagement has been an important focus of study.

- A 2008 study using survey data collected by the Pew Internet and American Life project found that, once offline newspaper and television news consumption as well as a wide variety of other important factors (including income, party affiliation, age, gender, race, education and political interest) were taken into account, then reading *online* news, participating in political chat rooms and sending or receiving e-mail supporting or opposing a candidate for office all were seen to enhance the likelihood of voting in presidential elections. Chat room usage had a stronger effect than did online news consumption. Measures of online engagement were unrelated to voting in the midterm elections.[11]
- A 2009 study that published results of a large-scale field experiment conducted during the 2006 elections found that a text to cell phone reminder to vote increased voter turnout by three percent.[12]
- A 2009 study of university undergraduates following the 2008 election found that membership in Facebook political groups strongly predicted *offline* political participation. The scale used to measure the extent of offline political participation included items tapping whether study participants voted in the 2008 election, planned to vote in 2010, attempted to persuade someone else to vote, donated money to a political candidate or campaign, worked as a paid employee or volunteer for a political candidate or campaign, attended a rally, displayed a campaign sticker, signed a petition and participated in a boycott.[13]

In short, increased online political engagement of various sorts often, but not always, is associated with increased offline political participation, including voting.

Some researchers have examined whether use of new media is associated with greater knowledge of political events or issues. **The evidence is mixed, but strongly suggests that, with respect to its impact on political knowledge, the *type* of new media use matters greatly.**

- A 2009 study of university undergraduates following the 2008 election found that those who were members of Facebook political groups did *not* have greater political knowledge.[14]
- A 2009 field experiment examining whether exposure to peer sharing of information on Facebook can lead to greater political knowledge randomly assigned subjects, all of whom were students at Georgia State, to "friend" one of two Facebook profiles. One of these regularly posted information about the Atlanta Mayoral election in the 7 days leading up to the election; the other posted information about entertainment. Those who "friended" the profile providing election information were 18.2 percent more likely to recall information about the Mayoral race than were those who "friended" the entertainment profile.[15]
- A 2010 study based on a representative sample of US adults found that, once demographic factors also related to political knowledge and participation were taken into account, using the Internet to discuss politics increased political knowledge and also increased—though somewhat more weakly—participation in politics.[16]

Typically, political cynicism and low levels of civic and political engagement are thought to go hand in hand. **A few researchers have inquired whether those young people who frequent social media also experience less cynicism about politics and have found that they do.**

- A 2010 study found that those who made *more* use of social networking sites, video sharing sites and blogs were *less* politically cynical. [17]
- A 2009 study found that college students on Facebook had higher opinions of the candidates in the 2008 Presidential election than did college students who were not on Facebook. Many of the former reported that the candidates' presence on Facebook made them feel more connected to the candidates.[18]

A very small number of studies found *no* relationship between new media use and political engagement.

- A 2010 study examining data on the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election collected by the Pew Internet and American Life project found that, although getting most of one's election-related information from *old media* enhanced the likelihood of voting, use of *new media* to get or share election-related information was unrelated to voting.[19]

While many studies find an association between new media use and at least some forms of civic and political engagement, and some of these studies also make sure that the findings they report have specifically taken into account the ways that civic and political engagement also are related to such characteristics as race, gender, age, education, and income, researchers usually ask respondents about their media use, political interest and knowledge, and their civic and political engagement all at a single point in time. This is called a cross-sectional study. A **few such studies use time-anchoring questions to try to investigate whether respondents' media use pre- or post-dates their past or anticipated civic or political behavior. But most studies are not so careful.**

There is very little research conducted on the same individuals at multiple time points. Such a study is called a panel study and it can help tease out whether more use of new media of particular types *produces* more civic or political engagement, *or* if more civic and political engagement *produces* more new media use of particular types.

- A 2005 panel study that *did* examine data gathered on the same large group of adults at two points in time suggested that consuming political information through television and newspapers increased political knowledge and discussion, but that increased political knowledge and discussion did *not* lead to consuming more political information through television and newspapers.[20]

Some cross-sectional research has applied one or more of the techniques statisticians developed to allow researchers to find results from survey data that come closer to what would be found from an experimental design, long considered the "gold standard" for teasing out cause and effect.[21] In these studies, media use can be seen as somewhat analogous to an experimental treatment administered to respondents who, although not randomly assigned to different levels or types of media use, have been matched as closely as possible with others who are similar to them on many other characteristics.

- A 2008 study that used such techniques on data from the 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2004 American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys suggested that Internet use might be a *consequence* of some forms of civic participation while *producing* other forms of civic engagement. This study found that using the Internet to get political information relative to not doing so increased the likelihood of: talking about politics with family and friends (by 10 percent), attending a rally (by 4-5 percent), donating money to a

political candidate (by 4-5 percent) contacting a government official (by 12.6 percent) and working with others to address a community issue (by 11 percent).[22]

- A 2009 study that used such techniques on data from a telephone survey showed that, while greater *Facebook* use i*ncreased* civic engagement and political knowledge, *MySpace* use was *unrelated* to civic engagement and *decreased* political knowledge, results that could not be explained by the profound demographic differences between the two sites' users.[23] (MySpace membership is less educated, less white and less male than is Facebook's membership.)[24]
- A 2009 study that used such techniques on data from the Pew Research Center's 2004 Post-Election Internet Tracking Survey found that visiting campaign web sites increased electoral activities, including sending e-mails urging others to vote (by 17.4 percent), attending a campaign rally (by 10.4 percent), e-mailing others to ask them to vote for a specific candidate (by 14.8 percent), calling or visiting others to ask them to vote for a specific candidate (by 8.8 percent), and giving money to a political candidate (by 11.2 percent). But visiting campaign web sites increased voting by only 1.7 percentage points.[25]

It is difficult to know what to make of this last study, however, because visiting a campaign web site is *itself* a form of political engagement and one might expect, for example, that those who are *already* likely voters might have a different likelihood of visiting campaign web sites than those who are not likely voters. It is not clear that the study dealt adequately with this particular problem.

Another group of cross-sectional studies that used different techniques to try to sort cause from effect when it comes to new media usage and civic engagement found somewhat *inconsistent results*.

- A 2008 study of data from the 2000 National Election Studies, the 2002 Pew Internet and American Life Daily Tracking Survey and a 2004 Pew Center for the People and the Press survey suggested that consumption of online election news relative to non-consumption increased political knowledge, interest and discussion, and that these results were stable in time.[26]

These findings are consistent with those from the 2005 panel study of adults that surveyed the same respondents at two points in time.[27] However:

- A 2009 study using techniques designed to help assess whether new media use produces political engagement or the other way around suggested that political knowledge predicted Facebook political group membership rather than Facebook political group membership predicting political knowledge.[28]
- A 2006 study also suggested that political interest strongly predicted both political use of the Internet and political engagement on the Internet, rather than the other way around.[29]

At this point we have insufficient evidence to know with any certainty, whether, under what conditions, or for which individuals, enhanced use of digital media may *produce* enhanced political or civic interest, knowledge and/or engagement or vice versa. **Some have suggested that we should view the relationship between new media use and civic and political engagement as reciprocal, and that the tendency to look for a one-way relationship is a major reason that the new media use-civic engagement relationship has been so difficult to pin down.**[30] In this view, there is a "virtuous cycle" in which civic and political engagement and social connectedness (for which new media may be one means) go hand-in-hand and reinforce one another, but neither can be seen clearly as either the cause or effect.

In Sum

In sum, findings about new media use and civic engagement are still mixed, with no clear consensus. But there is more evidence suggesting that **greater use of new media is associated with greater civic and political engagement** than there is evidence inconsistent with this claim. Whether this positive association can reasonably be interpreted to mean that new media use *produces* greater levels of civic and political participation is an open question. **Existing research does suggest that fears that the Internet would *diminish* civic and political engagement, common in the early years of the Internet, and most famously asserted by Robert Putman in his well known book *Bowling Alone*,[31] were overblown.**

[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).

[2] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

[3] Zizi Papachrissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*, Polity, 2010, pp. 7-8.

[4] Homero Gil de Zúňiga, Eulalia Puig-I-Abril and Hernando Rojas, "Weblogs, Traditional Sources Online and Political Participation: An Assessment of How the Internet is Changing the Political Environment," *New Media & Society* 11(4), 2009, pp. 553-574.

[5] Dhavan V. Shah, Jaeho Cho, William P. Eveland Jr., and Nojin Kwak, "Information and Expression in a Digital Age," *Communication Research* 32(5), 2005, pp. 531-565.

[6] Homero Gil de Zúňiga, Aaron Veenstra, Emily Vraga, and Dhaven Shah, "Digital Democracy: Reimagining Pathways to Political Participation," *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 7(1), 2010, pp. 36-51.

[7] Bryan Boroughs, *Social Networking Websites and Voter Turnout*, MA Thesis, Georgetown University, 2011.

[8] Weiwu Zhang and Stella C. Chia, "The Effects of Mass Media Use and Social Capital on Civic and Political Participation," *Communication Studies* 57(3), 2006, pp. 177-197.

[9] Mathew Kushin and Masahiro Yamahoto, "Did Social Media Really Matter? College Students' Use of Online Media and Political Decision Making in the 2008 Election," *Mass Communication and Society* 13(5), 2010, pp. 608-630.

[10] Keith Hampton, "Comparing Bonding and Bridging Ties for Democratic Engagement: Everyday Use of Communication Technologies within Social Networks for Civic and Civil Behaviors," *Information, Communication, Society* 14(4), in press 2011.

[11] Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert and Ramona S. McNeal, *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation*, MIT Press, 2008.

[12] Allison Dale and Aaron Strauss, "Mobilizing the Mobiles: Text Messaging and Turnout," in *Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications,* ed. C. Panagopoulus, Rutgers University Press, 2009.

[13] Jessica T. Fezeel, Meredith Conroy and Mario Guerrero, "Facebook is…Fostering Political Engagement: A Study of Online Social Networking Groups and Offline Participation," Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, Canada, 2009.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Holly Teresi, "Friending Your Way to Political Knowledge: A Field Experiment of Computer-mediated Social Networks," Political Science Theses Paper 29, 2009, retrieved July 26, 2011 (http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/political-science-theses/29).

[16] Soo Young Bae, Nojin Kwak and Scott Campbell, "Discussing Politics Online: The Interactive Relationship between Offline Political Talk and Online Political Discussion," Suntec Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Center, Suntec City, Singapore, 2010, retrieved April 15, 2011 (http://www/allacademic.com.meta/p405239-index.html).

[17] Gary Hansen, Paul Michaelo Haridakis, Audrew Wagstaff Cunningham, Rekha Sharma and J.D. Ponder, "The 2008 Presidential Campaign: Political Cynicism in the Age of Facebook, MySpace, and You Tube," *Mass Communication and Society* 13(5), 2010, pp. 584-607. The authors measured political cynicism as did Bruce Pinkleton and Erica Weintraub Austin, in their 2001 article, "Individual Motivations, Perceived Media Importance and Political Disaffection," (*Political Communication* 18, pp. 321-334). The measure of political

cynicism assessed whether respondents agreed or disagreed that politicians typically are honest, look out for the public's interests, or lose touch with life in the real world after they are elected; and whether respondents agreed or disagreed that they were frustrated with the way government works, disgusted with politics, or satisfied with the way the government works.

[18] Sara Warren, *The Internet and Politics: Facebook as a Campaign Tool,* University of Central Missouri, 2009.

[19] Alex Budak, *Facebook, Twitter and Barack Obama: New Media and the 2008 Presidential Election*, MA Thesis, Georgetown University, Washington DC, August 1, 2010.

[20] William P. Eveland Jr., Andrew Hayes, Dhavan V. Shah and Nojin Kwak, "Understanding the Relationship Between Communication and Political Knowledge: A Model Comparison Approach Using Panel Data*," Political Communication* 22(4), 2005, pp. 423-446; see also Shah et al 2005, *supra* n. 5

[21] For field experiments, see Dale and Strauss 2009, *supra* n. 12 and Teresi 2009, *supra*, n. 15.

[22] Hun Myoung Park and James L. Perry, "Does Internet Use Really Facilitate Civic Engagement? Evidence from the American National Election Studies," in *Civic Engagement in a Network Society*, ed. K. Yang and E. Bergrund, pp. 237-269, Information Age Publishing, 2008. The American National Election Studies (ANES, sometimes NES) is a collaborative research program between the University of Michigan and Stanford University, producing comparable data on voting and political participation at regular intervals. For more information, see http://www.electionstudies.org/ (accessed September 22, 2011).

[23] Josh Pasek, Eian More and Daniel Romer, "Realizing the Social Internet? Online Social Networking Meets Offline Civic Engagement," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 6(3-4), 2009, pp. 197-215.

[24] Riva Richmond, "Does Social Networking Breed Division," *New York Times*, July 9, 2009, retrieved (http://gadgetwise.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/09/does-social-networking-breed-social-division/).

[25] Hun Myoung Park and James L. Perry, "Do Campaign Web Sites Really Matter in Electoral Civic Engagement," in *Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications*, ed. C. Panagopoulos, pp. 101-123, Rutgers University Press, 2009.

[26] Jason MacDonald and Caroline J. Tolbert, "Something Rich and Something Strange: Participation, Engagement and the Tempest of Online Politics," in *Civic Engagement in A Network Society*, ed. K. Yang and E. Bergrund, pp. 272-281, Information Age Publishing, 2008.

[27] Eveland Jr. et al, 2005, *supra* n. 20.

[28] Feezel et al 2009, *supra* n. 13.

[29] Brian Krueger, "A Comparison of Conventional and Internet Political Mobilization," *American Politics Research* 34(6), 2006, pp. 759-776.

[30] Dhavan Shah, "Civic Engagement, Interpersonal Trust and Television Use: An Individual-Level Assessment of Social Capital," *Political Psychology* 19(3), 1998, pp. 469-96; see also Park and Perry, *supra* n. 22.

[31] Putnam 2000, *supra* n. 2.