

# Research Synopsis

## New Media Use and Civic Engagement – Part 1<sup>1</sup>



Usage of Internet-based “new media” has been the subject of extensive study. As it began to take hold, **some commentators argued that the Internet could reverse anticipated declines in civic engagement, but others worried that the Internet would destroy what little civic engagement was left.**<sup>2</sup>

*QUESTIONS* Is the advent of new media in fact 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?

### *SEEKING ANSWERS*

Research findings are mixed, but the weight of evidence suggests that new media, especially when used for political purposes, are associated with **greater civic and political engagement** along various dimensions. For example:

- A 2011 study of data from the 2008 Pew Post-Election Tracking Survey found that those who accessed political content on social networking sites also were far more likely to vote.<sup>3</sup>
- A 2009 study using data collected from the 2004 Pew Post-Election Tracking Survey found that those who read blogs more often also participated in more online political discussion, online political campaigning, and online political donations or petition signing, once a variety of other important factors were taken into account.<sup>4</sup>
- A 2008 study of data from the American National Election Studies showed that using the Internet to get political information relative to not doing so increased the likelihood of: talking about politics with family and friends, attending a rally, donating money to a political candidate, contacting a government official, and working with others to address a community issue.<sup>5</sup>

“New media” include online forums such as discussion groups, social-networking sites, and blogs, as well as email and texting.

“Civic engagement” refers to political activities, including: political interest, knowledge, and campaigning; voting; trust in political leaders; and political group membership, discussion and mobilization, including political donations and petition signing. It also refers to non-political activities such as non-political community-group and voluntary-organization membership and activities, volunteering, and trust in fellow citizens.

**Treating new media as a single category is unwise. Both the type of new media and the type of participation matter.** For example:

- A 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 than are other new media forms such as e-mail and mobile telephones.<sup>6</sup>
- 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 were taken into account, then reading online news, participating in political chat rooms and sending or receiving e-mail supporting or opposing a candidate all were seen to enhance the likelihood of voting in presidential elections.<sup>7</sup>

- A large-scale 2009 field experiment found that a text reminder to vote increased voter turnout by three percent.<sup>8</sup>
- The same 2009 study that found blog readers engaged in more online political participation, found that blog readers did not engage in more offline political participation.<sup>9</sup>

A very small number of studies have found *no* relationship between new media use and political engagement.<sup>10</sup>

There is little research conducted on the same individuals at multiple time points, a technique that can help tease out whether more use of new media *produce* more civic or political engagement, *or* if more civic and political engagement *produce* more new media use.

On one hand

- A 2005 study that did collect data on the same individuals at two points in time found that using online media encouraged 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.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand:

- 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.<sup>12</sup>

It may be that 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 the “cause” or the “effect.”<sup>13</sup> More research is needed to understand the full nature of possible reciprocity between new media use and civic and political engagement.

**IMPLICATIONS** In sum, findings about new media use and civic engagement are mixed. 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. Overall, research suggests that **incipient fears that the Internet would diminish civic and political engagement were overblown.**

<sup>1</sup> This synopsis is based on the National Institute for Civil Discourse Issue Brief No. 2: New Media Usage and Civic Engagement (1) by Robin Stryker and Heidi Reynolds-Stensen, both of the Department of Sociology, The University of Arizona, dated July 29, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The latter proposition was most famously asserted by Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Bryan Boroughs, *Social Networking Websites and Voter Turnout*, MA Thesis, Georgetown University, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Aaron Vennstra, Emily Vraga and Dhaven Shah, “Digital Democracy: Reimagining Pathways to Political Participation: An Assessment of How the Internet is Changing the Political Environment,” *New Media & Society* 11(4), 2009, pp. 553-574.

<sup>5</sup> 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. Berglund, pp. 237-269, Information Age Publishing, 2008. The American National Election Studies (ANES) 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).

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert and Ramona S. McNeal, *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation*, MIT Press, 2008.

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<sup>8</sup> Allison Dale and Aaron Strauss, "Mobilizing the Mobiles: Text Messaging and Turnout," in *Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications*, ed. C. Panagopoulos, Rutgers University Press, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Gil de Zúñiga et al, supra n. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Budak, *Facebook, Twitter and Barack Obama: New Media and the 2008 Presidential Election*. MA Thesis, Georgetown University, Washington DC, August 1, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Dhavan Shah, "Civic Engagement, Interpersonal Trust and Television Use: An Individual-Level Assessment of Social Capital." *Political Psychology* 19(3), pp. 469-96, 1998; see also Park and Perry, supra n. 5.