

Chapter LXXV

The Impact of the Internet on Political Activism: Evidence from Europe

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ABSTRACT

The core issue for this study concerns less the social than the political consequences of the rise of knowledge societies; in particular, the capacity of the Internet for strengthening democratic participation and civic engagement linking citizens and government. To consider these issues, Part I summarizes debates about the impact of the Internet on the public sphere. The main influence of this development, as it is theorized in a market model, will be determined by the “supply” and “demand” for electronic information and communications about government and politics. Demand, in turn, is assumed to be heavily dependent upon the social characteristics of Internet users and their prior political orientations. Given this understanding, the study predicts that the primary impact of knowledge societies in democratic societies will be upon facilitating cause-oriented and civic forms of political activism, thereby strengthening social movements and interest groups, more than upon conventional channels of political participation exemplified by voting, parties, and election campaigning. Part II summarizes the sources of survey data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the 19-nation European Social Survey, 2002. Part III examines the evidence for the relationship between use of the Internet and indicators of civic engagement. The conclusion in Part IV summarizes the results and considers the broader implications for governance and democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of knowledge societies represents one of the most profound transformations that has occurred in recent decades. The diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) promises to have major social consequences by expanding access to education and training, broadening channels of expression and social networks, as well as revolutionizing the nature of work and the economy. The primary impact of this development has been evident in affluent societies, but the Internet has also been widely regarded as an important instrument for social change in poorer nations around the globe (Franda, 2002; UN, 2002).

PART I: THEORIES OF THE IMPACT OF KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES ON DEMOCRACY

There are multiple theories about how the growth of knowledge societies could potentially influence civic engagement in contemporary democracies. Four main perspectives can be identified in the literature.

The Internet as a Virtual Agora

The most positive view is held by cyber-optimists who emphasize the Panglossian possibilities of the Internet for the involvement of ordinary citizens in direct, deliberative, or “strong” democracy. Digital technologies are thought to hold promise as a mechanism facilitating alternative channels of civic engagement exemplified by political chat rooms, remote electronic voting in elections, referenda, plebiscites, and the mobilization of virtual communities, thereby revitalizing levels of mass participation in public affairs (Barber, 1998; Budge, 1996). This view was certainly popular as the Internet rapidly expanded in the United States during the mid-1990s and the radical potential of digital technologies for democracy continues to be expressed by enthusiasts today (Gilder, 2000; Rash, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Schwartz, 1996).

Moreover, the general claim that the knowledge society will stimulate widespread citizen deliberation in affairs of state so that the Internet functions like a virtual Agora while attractive as a normative ideal, became less plausible once it was widely recognized by many observers that there are substantial disparities in who becomes involved in digital politics. Studies of politically-oriented discussion groups, bulletin boards, and online chat rooms have found that these largely fail as deliberative forums, instead serving as places to reinforce like-minded voices due to their “easy entrance, easy exit” characteristics (Davis, 1999; Davis & Owen, 1998; Wilhelm, 2001). The survey evidence from many countries indicates that those who take advantage of the opportunities for electronic civic engagement are often activists who were already most predisposed to participate via the traditional channels of political participation (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Selnow, 1998; Toulouse & Luke, 1998). The Internet is a medium of choice par excellence, so it seems improbable that political Web sites, chat rooms and online news will reach many citizens who are otherwise disengaged, apathetic, or uninterested, if they choose to spend their time and energies on multiple alternative sites devoted to everything from the stock market to games and music (Bonfadelli, 2002; Johnson & Kaye, 2003). In this regard, the Internet seems analogous to the segmented magazine market, where some subscribe to the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Economist* and *Foreign Affairs*, but others pick *Golfing Weekly* or *Playboy*. Therefore, claims for the potential of the knowledge society to revitalize mass participation or strong democracies find little support from the available empirical studies.

The Knowledge Elite and Social Inequalities

As the Internet evolved during the last decade, a darker vision developed among cyber-pessimists who regard the knowledge society as a Pandora’s Box reinforcing existing inequalities of power and wealth and generating deeper divisions between the information rich and poor. In this perspective, the global and social divides in Internet access

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