

New Media and Democratic Citizenship

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INTRODUCTION

Citizenship and New Media

The issue of the civic potential of the Internet has been at the forefront of much scholarly discussion over the last 10 to 15 years. Before providing a comprehensive overview of the different schools of thought currently dominating this debate, it is necessary to briefly describe how researchers have defined the terms *citizenship* and *new media*. Across different literatures, two ways of examining citizenship emerge. The first approach examines citizenship broadly as citizen involvement in the political process. Scheufele and Nisbet (2002), for example, identified three dimensions of citizenship: feelings of efficacy, levels of information, and participation in the political process. The second approach taps citizenship much more narrowly as social capital (i.e., the more emotional and informal ties among citizens in a community) (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001).

Depending on which definition of citizenship they followed, researchers also have been interested in different types of new media use with a primary focus on the Internet. Some have examined the Internet as a medium that functions in a top-down fashion similar to traditional mass media. These scholars mostly are concerned with how online information gathering differs from traditional media use, such as newspaper readership or TV viewing. More recently, scholars have begun to examine different dimensions of Internet use, including chatting online about politics, e-mail exchanges with candidates and other citizens, and online donations to campaigns.

Cyber Optimism vs. Cyber Realism

In part as a result of these diverse sets of definitions, researchers of political communication have yet to come to a consensus about the practical uses of the Internet in promoting active citizenship. Some researchers, often labeled cyber optimists, suggest that this new medium can reverse waning levels of political participation, based on the assumption that users will access information and will

coordinate political activism via the Internet (Bimber, 1998; Davis, 1999; Kaid, 2002; Rhiengold, 1993). Many of these scholars view the Internet as a vehicle for increasing political participation by means of educating individuals, measuring public opinion, facilitating communication with political actors, providing public forums, and making both registering for and participating in elections easier (Davis, 1999).

Conversely, other researchers suggest that the Internet's potential for civic renewal is limited, and that the Internet, at best, complements traditional media channels (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Margolis, Resnick, & Tu, 1997; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Furthermore, some researchers have suggested that the Internet may negatively affect community involvement and may replace social interactions with solitary activities (Nie, 2001; Nie & Erbring, 2000).

BACKGROUND

The Effect of the Internet on Democratic Citizenship

This lack of consensus among political communication scholars is due, in part, to the nature of this new medium. As Jennings and Zeiter (2003) noted, "Trying to assess the political impact of the Internet ... involves shooting at a moving target" (p. 311). That is, the rapid expansion of adoption of this new medium combined with the continual introduction of newer technologies that make the Internet more efficient result in a constantly morphing entity. Moreover, the civic consequences of the variety of different uses of the Internet have yet to be examined systematically and empirically.

Unfortunately, many of the existing empirical examinations of the role of the Internet in promoting citizenship are plagued by significant methodological problems. One problem is the attempts of many researchers to reinvent the wheel when it comes to operational definitions of Internet use. Rather than developing measures of Internet

use based on well-developed measures of traditional media use, for example, researchers have relied simplistically on time-spent measures instead of content- or channel-specific measures (Shah et al., 2001). Shah and his colleagues stated, “Studies on the psychological and sociological consequences of Internet use have tended to view the Internet as an amorphous whole, neglecting the fact that individuals make very different uses of this emerging medium” (Shah et al., 2001, p. 142). In other words, there has been a misguided focus on the online/off-line distinction in research that has examined the linkage between technology and citizenship. A study by Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, and Dunsmore (2003) found that the online/off-line distinction has little explanatory power in examining the civic consequences of the Internet when controlling for specific dimensions of Internet use. Moy and her colleagues demonstrated that a time-spent measure did not have any significant effects on levels of civic engagement, when more specific uses of the Internet are included in an explanatory statistical model.

A second problem is the conceptualization of the Internet as a single dimension. Given the integration of technologies found within the medium (Bimber, 2000), users can access civic information, exchange electronic mail, chat about politics, and/or donate money to political campaigns by logging on to the Internet. These different communication acts and information exchanges could have very different civic consequences. For example, time spent searching information on governmental Web sites is different from time spent in political chat rooms arguing over normative political opinions. Bimber (2000) correctly stated that searching for “‘the effects of the Internet’ may become a conceptually muddled pursuit” (p. 330). Furthermore, seeking civic information online should not be considered a single act but should be differentiated between different types of Web site use (Hardy, 2004).

A third reason why empirical research has not yet come to a consensus about the practical uses of the Internet in promoting active citizenship is what Bimber (2000) calls “mutualism, the interdependence of new and old modes of communication in civic life” (p. 330). Most political intuitions now are using the Internet as a complementary tool to traditional media instead of a separate entity. Simply put, political campaigns use Web sites as well as television commercials. Therefore, the Internet is becoming an integrated part of an overall media infrastructure instead of becoming an independent communication system. Researchers such as Scheufele and Nisbet (2002) have suggested that citizens who seek political information online are likely to be the same individuals that seek information from traditional media sources. In other words, the Internet is an additional source of political information that fits well into an overall media system; it is not an independent entity.

CYBER CITIZENSHIP

The Current State of Cyber Citizenship

Although much empirical research on the civic consequences of the Internet has been plagued with problems of conceptualization, there is a growing body of literature that has looked more closely at patterns of use instead of overall connectivity to the Web. Research suggests that political informational uses of the Internet encourage community involvement and political participation (Norris, 1998). A study by Hardy (2004) demonstrated significant pro-civic consequences of different types of information available on different types of Web sites. In this study, Hardy differentiated between primary-source Web site use and secondary-source Web site use. Primary-source Web sites were conceptualized as Web sites that are connected to governmental institutions, special interest groups, and political actors, while secondary-source Web sites were conceptualized as commercial news Web sources such as CNN.com or MSNBC.com. This study showed that primary-source Web site use was related positively and directly to levels of political participation but was not related to political knowledge. Secondary-source Web site use was related directly and positively to levels of political knowledge but was related indirectly to levels of political participation. The effect of secondary-source Web site use on political participation was mediated by political knowledge.

What these findings suggest is that citizens are using primary-source Web sites to retrieve mobilizing information only. Mobilizing information is information that “helps people act on attitudes they already have” (Lemert, 1981, p. 118). In advertising, mobilizing information is the address of the business, hours of operation, and other information that allow individuals to act. For example, if an individual is shopping for a new computer, an advertisement on television that gives the location of an electronics store allows the individual to act on his or her intention of buying a computer. In the realm of politics, mobilizing information would be information such as the time and place of a local meeting, location of polls on election day, contact information of political actors, and so forth. This information enables individuals to participate politically.

Therefore, individuals are visiting governmental sites to find mobilizing information, such as time and place of local meetings, which allows them to act on their intention of being an active citizenship. On the other hand, individuals are not using these governmental Web sites to find information about public issues and public policy; individuals use commercial news Web sites for that information.

Unlike traditional mass media, such as television, radio, and newspapers, the Internet provides not only a

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