

THE ELECTRONIC REPUBLIC? EVIDENCE ON THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE U.S.

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Introduction

In 1991, Lawrence Grossman wrote that “a new political system is taking shape in the United States. As we approach the twenty-first century, America is turning into an electronic republic, a democratic system that is vastly increasing the people’s day-to-day influence on decisions of state.”¹ Grossman’s forecast implied a sea change in the way citizens would interact with, and participate in, their representative government; a revamping of the way Americans would ‘do’ citizenship. Thomas Johnson and Barbara Kaye echoing Grossman’s forecast, reported that “Internet utopians, writing in advance of the 1996 presidential election, breathlessly predicted the ‘Net would transform the democratic process by both increasing the public’s access to government officials and their power over them.”

Have these forecasts come to be? Has the United States—fueled by citizens’ increasing access to the Internet—become an ‘electronic republic’? This article will explore the literature in several areas (e.g., political science, civic education, social studies education, instructional technology) in order to summarize relevant research on the nature and degree of the Internet’s impact on civic engagement and citizenship participation in the United States. The article will conclude with a re-examination of Grossman’s prediction.

A Few Words About ‘CyberCitizenship’ and the ‘Digital Divide’

It should be noted that this article seeks to report on the impact of the Internet on civic participation and engagement. As such, the article is not about ‘digital citizenship,’ or developing effective ‘cybercitizens.’ Digital citizenship has been defined as “the norms of behavior with regard to technology use and thus is more focused on issues related to the citizenship in cyberspace such as the use and misuse of technology, Net etiquette, and appropriate Internet use policies.”² This is an important area of

study, but is not the focus of this article.³

In order to accurately gauge the impact of the Internet on civic engagement in the United States, we must first determine the degree to which all citizens have access to the Internet. The 'digital divide' has been defined as the gap in Internet access that was first associated with socioeconomic and regional factors (i.e., poor and rural) and that has, to some degree, continued to be associated with racial/ethnic factors. While few would debate the continued existence of this digital divide, recent data have suggested that the divide is rapidly shrinking across racial/ethnic lines, that socioeconomic and regional factors explain only portions of the divide, and that the actual 'gap' may be overstated. For example, the U.S. Department of Commerce study *A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use Of The Internet*, found that the rates of Internet use by the lowest income households (those earning less than \$15,000 per year) increased by more than twice the rate of the highest income households (those earning more than \$75,000 per year) from 1998 to 2001. During the same time period, Internet use by African Americans and Hispanics increased at annual rates of 30 and 33 percent respectively, with both groups outpacing growth rates among Caucasians.⁴ A 2003 Pew study also called into question the notion that lack of Internet access was wholly responsible for keeping some Americans offline.⁵ The Pew study concluded that 20 percent of non-Internet users lived in homes with Internet access. These 'net evaders' chose to remain offline for various reasons. Indeed, only 11 percent of the Pew sample indicated having 'no computer' was the main reason for not going online. U.S. Census Bureau data indicated that in 2003, 79.1 percent of American adults reported having access to the Internet either at home or at work,⁶ and this proportion had increased from 26 percent in 1996, and 54 percent in 1998.⁷ Again, while these data do not wholly refute the existence of a digital divide, they do suggest that access to the Internet is enjoyed by more citizens than ever before and that this gap is shrinking rapidly. More importantly for purposes of this paper, recent findings suggest that while "demographically, citizens who use the Internet for political purposes differ a little from the rest of the population" in fact these differences "are not as great as one might guess."⁸

The Evolution of the Internet's Role in Civic Engagement

When Lawrence Grossman wrote in 1991 that "a democratic political transformation [was] being propelled" in part by the 'explosive growth of new telecommunications media' and the convergence of "television, satellites, cables, and personal computers,"⁹ the Internet, as we know it today was in its nascence and the World Wide Web had not yet been invented by Timothy Berners-Lee.¹⁰ What Grossman was describing

was the evolving interactive nature of telecommunications in terms of 'smart' television, and other electronic media of the time. Grossman's overview of the potential impact of this new technology on the traditional role of citizens and political leaders in the United States was remarkably similar, however, to the descriptions of the potential impact of the Internet on citizenship and civic engagement today. For example, Grossman proposed that this new electronic media was "shrinking the distance between the governed and those who govern" and "more citizens [were] gaining a greater voice in the making of public policy than at any time since the direct democracy of the ancient Greek city-states...." Grossman pointed out that interactive telecommunications made it possible for "tens of millions of widely dispersed citizens to receive the information they need to carry out the business of government themselves...."¹¹ Not surprisingly, similar claims are being made today about the Internet. Does the proliferation of the Internet—particularly in its manifestation as a widely accessible, interconnected network of political and citizenship information—mean that Grossman's predication of an 'electronic republic' has come to pass? Is it already here?

Certainly, the emergence of the Internet as a nearly ubiquitous element of American society has brought about new opportunities to enhance citizen engagement in democratic politics and to increase the level of civic engagement among American citizens. To find a case study of this phenomenon, one needs to look no further than the 2004 presidential campaign of Howard Dean. Dean, a small state governor with little political capital became, for a time, the biggest news story of the 2004 primary season. This was due, in no small part, to his savvy use of the Internet. Perhaps the Internet did not actually invent Howard Dean (as was proposed by Gary Wolf in a January 2004 story that appeared in *Wired* magazine), but Dean was able to move into serious contention for the Democratic nomination by utilizing the Internet for fundraising, communication, and, perhaps most importantly, getting input on his campaign from citizens via e-mail, blogs,¹² and chat rooms. As Dean himself put it "if I give a speech and the blog people don't like it, next time I change the speech."¹³

The Internet and Civic Engagement

Did the Dean campaign signal a change in American politics brought on by the Internet? Are Americans increasing their political participation and civic engagement as a function of the Internet? Are Americans voting more often because of political information that is now available to them online? Is political activism, or activism in any form, on the rise because of the nearly costless organizing capabilities the Internet provides? Political and other social scientists have been collecting data on these and

other similar questions since the 1992 presidential election, and a body of literature with tentative answers to these questions has begun to emerge.

The remainder of this article will attempt to provide a summary of this body of literature. I will begin by first outlining what proponents describe as the potential of the Internet to impact the role of citizens, to increase citizens' access to government officials, or to increase civic engagement. I will then turn to a review of literature on the influence of the Internet with respect to each of the following aspects: (1) voting rates and voter participation; (2) political information seeking behavior by citizens; (3) civic engagement (other than voting); (4) citizen networks, issue advocacy, and activism; and, (5) the influence of electronic government (e-gov) on citizens.

Potential Impact of the Internet on Civic Engagement

Langdon Winner has written that "a persistent, colorful theme in American political thought is the conviction that new technologies will revitalize democratic society, enabling citizens to command...the resources needed to become effectively self-governing."¹⁴ Indeed, Winner argued, this theme has reappeared in nearly every generation since the nineteenth century and has become "a standard motif in the nation's public rhetoric." Winner described how the building of canals and railroads and the development of the telegraph, the radio, and the television all sparked "enthusiastic proclamations that (these) innovations would give ordinary folks greater access to resources...and broader opportunities for political involvement."¹⁵ What makes the Internet different from each of these previous technologies? Should we expect the Internet to change the civic and political landscape when each of these preceding technologies did not?

Some have argued that the Internet—by its very nature—is qualitatively different from these other technologies. Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, for example, argued that the "Internet's most unique characteristics—the marriage of increased information, targeting by providers, filtering and active self-selection by consumers and bi-directionality of communication—seem to offer truly new prospects for civic engagement."¹⁶ Perhaps the most powerful difference, they argued, can be seen in the Internet's interactive nature; the ability for a citizen to access information and act on it immediately (e.g., by communicating with other citizens, elected officials or interest groups; by giving money to a campaign; by signing a petition, etc.) "is a radically new feature of the information environment."¹⁷

Given these qualitatively different aspects of the Internet, what potential does this 'new feature of the information environment' hold for the political and civic landscape and for civic engagement—for how

Americans 'do' citizenship in this country? One of the most highly touted aspects of the Internet is its potential to increase voter participation through increased access to political information.¹⁸ Proponents claim the Internet can reduce the costs associated with voting by providing online voter registration and by making it easier to gather information about candidates and issues. As Johnson and Kaye noted, "the Internet may have its greatest influence on those individuals already engaged in the political process because it reduces times and cost of acquiring information and makes it easier for those who want to participate to engage in politics."¹⁹ Thus, such proponents argue, the Internet provides important online resources for the voter. Some evidence does indicate that American voters are increasing their use of the Internet to gather political information, but evidence is mixed on whether this increased access to information has led to increased voter participation rates.

Michael Cornfield has argued that the Internet has the potential to make Americans 'smarter' voters in four unique ways. First, because the Internet can accommodate multimedia presentations, voters can judge candidates on more than looks alone. Second, unlike some traditional media (e.g., television), the Internet allows the voter to set his or her own pace when gathering information about candidates. Cornfield suggests that such individual pacesetting may also foster more deliberation about ideas because voters can return to Web sites and review information over multiple sessions. Third, both voters and candidates can use the Internet to collect information about each other and use this information in meaningful ways. Finally, the Internet can promote feedback on issues from voters to candidates and *vice versa*.²⁰

Voting is an integral part of any healthy civil society, but civic engagement can, and must, involve more than simply voting. Indeed, citizens interact with their government in a number of ways beyond voting. Citizens, for example, need to access information from their government, and they also seek a wide array of services from government agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. The so-called 'E-government' has evolved to meet these needs. For example, as a citizen of the state of Indiana, I can use AccessIndiana (<http://www.in.gov/>) to renew my driver's license online. In addition, I can track the status of the latest education legislation before the Indiana General Assembly, and then e-mail my thoughts about it to my state representative. As Stanley and Weare have noted, this evolution has been influenced by those who "tout the ability of technology to make government more efficient and responsive and to strengthen citizen participation by...lowering the cost of participation and creating new opportunities for involvement."²¹

Many have argued that the very nature of the Internet—a transnational network of computers all able to communicate with each other—

holds tremendous potential for revolutionizing communication between the governed and the governing. The potential to allow average citizens to influence policy by enhancing their ability to communicate directly with their elected representatives would, proponents argue, compel “public officials, in turn, [to] actively seek out public opinion through electronic town halls and online opinion polls...”²² Consider, for example, that in 1992 few members of the U.S. Congress had e-mail addresses and even fewer had Web pages. By 2005, every one of the 535 members of the 109th Congress had e-mail and nearly all had Web pages. Or, consider how easy it has become to track and comment on federal legislation using such political portals as Congress.org or Thomas (<http://thomas.loc.gov>).

The powerful communication resources of the Internet also offer new, and inexpensive, opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions to other citizens and to engage in grassroots organization and activism. In the landmark *Reno vs. ACLU*, the U.S. Supreme Court found that the Internet constituted a “new market place of ideas” where, through the use of chat rooms, for example, “any person with a phone line can become a town crier” and “through the use of webpages, mail exploders, and newsgroups, the same individual can become a pamphleteer.”²³ Issue-oriented advocacy groups have adopted Internet-based communication and organizing strategies because the Internet drastically reduces the cost of such communication and allows for timely updates on important issues or key legislative action.²⁴

Proponents of the Internet’s potential for transforming political participation and civic engagement in the United States have built a strong case. Research in political and social science has begun to examine questions surrounding this case. The results, at least to this point, are decidedly mixed. Indeed, a number of researchers have reported data that have—to a large extent—failed to support much of the potential impact claimed above. Stanley and Weare, reviewing research on these same questions, concluded that “in sum, empirical knowledge concerning the effects of the Internet on political participation lags far behind the theoretical debate” in part, they claimed, because of the complexity of the relationship between technology and participation.²⁵ Hacker and van Dijk concluded that while a few of the Internet proponents’ claims were supported by data, “most suffer from over-simplistic assumptions about human communication and democratic political systems.”²⁶ Cornfield also cautioned us that “first we must set aside the expectations that the Internet is a magic pump” that can increase voter participation and civic engagement.²⁷ Delli Carpini and Keeter summarized these same concerns when they noted:

There is little doubt that the way citizens consume political and public affairs information is changing. Less clear are the implications of this transformation

for the practice of democratic politics. Whether the emerging information environment will be little more than 'old wine in new bottles'...or will usher in a new more participatory citizenry and responsive government remains open to question.²⁸

Moreover, data from the National Election Survey (NES)²⁹ indicated no significant increase in Americans' campaign-related political participation from 1948 to 2000. The NES measures political participation as engaging in one of five acts: (a) attending campaign meetings, (b) working for a campaign, (c) displaying a campaign button or sign, (d) donating money, or (e) trying to influence others. Results of the NES studies imply that American political participation has remained largely unchanged over the last 60 years. Indeed, Stanley and Weare reported that "[d]espite the rise of television, cable television, faxes, and other new communication technologies, campaign-related participation hovered around a mean of 32.5% when one controls for peaks in presidential election years."³⁰

Given both the persuasive rhetoric of Internet proponents and the cautious concerns voiced by other scholars, we are left with the proverbial question: Is the glass half-full or half-empty? The following sections attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the research literature as it relates to the impact of the Internet on political participation and civic engagement. Perhaps, following this review, we may be able to conclude that the glass is slightly more than half-full.

Research on the Impact of the Internet on Voter Participation

Voting is one of the most common indicators used by political scientists to measure civic engagement. As Verba et al. noted, "[s]tudies of political participation traditionally have begun—and too often ended with—the vote."³¹ Although I want to take a wide view of civic participation—wider than simply voting—reviewing studies of the impact of the Internet on voting behavior is an important place to begin.

Several studies have attempted to determine if Internet use was positively correlated with voter participation. For example, Tolbert and MacNeil used multivariate analysis on NES survey data gathered for the 1996 and 2000 presidential election. They reported that "in presidential elections the Internet may increase voter turnout by giving individuals greater access to political information" and after controlling for a number of potentially confounding variables, Tolbert and MacNeil found that "respondents who reported viewing online election information were more likely to report voting."³² Tolbert and MacNeil estimated that respondents with Internet access were 12.0 percent and 7.5 percent more likely to vote in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections respectively, but no more likely to vote in the 1998 congressional election.³³ Tolbert and

MacNeil found that this relationship between voting and Internet use held across racial/ethnic lines thus suggesting the “mobilizing potential of the Internet during elections, regardless of race/ethnicity.”³⁴

Results of other studies, however, were less clear about the relationship between Internet use and voting behavior. In a survey of “politically interested web users” Johnson and Kaye found that the number of hours spent accessing political information online was not a significant predictor of voting. Similarly, Johnson and Kaye also found that respondents who spent longer periods of time online did not report a stronger intention to vote.³⁵

During the 2000 presidential campaign, The Pew Internet and American Life Project³⁶ conducted a survey of 4,186 online users. The results suggested that there was no indication that the Internet was drawing people—regardless of age—into the political process. Kohut et al. found that “controlling for other factors related to participation, Internet users [were] no more likely to be engaged in the political process, and show[ed] no more propensity to vote than non-users.”³⁷ A second Pew study, of more than 2,700 adults in the United States, was conducted to determine the relationship between Internet use and political participation in the 2002 congressional elections. Analysis revealed a number of factors that were positively correlated with voting behavior, including previous voting behavior, age, level of education, and employment history. Among the factors *not* significantly correlated were gender, race, and Internet use. In other words, respondents’ use of the Internet was *not* a significant predictor of reported voting behavior.³⁸

While the impact of Internet use on citizens’ voting behavior remains uncertain, there is evidence that the Internet is changing the way Americans gather political information and, to a lesser extent, on the degree of political knowledge Americans possess; both of which are related to the practice of voting as well as to other forms of civic engagement. The importance of such information for citizens can be seen in one of James Madison’s more famous quotes which contained the warning that “popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or perhaps both.”³⁹

Such political information and knowledge is also important for citizens because research suggests that better informed citizens are more likely to participate in civic society. Indeed, Delli Carpini and Keeter noted that “research has found that better informed citizens are...more likely to be interested in and discuss politics; and are more likely to participate in politics in a variety of ways.” They went on to conclude that more-informed citizens hold opinions that differ significantly from those held by less-well-informed citizens with similar characteristics.⁴⁰

What has been the impact of the Internet on citizens’ acquisition of

political information and knowledge? Preliminary evidence seems to indicate that, with a number of caveats, "the Internet is already having an impact on the political knowledge levels of citizens who are actively using the medium to gather information."⁴¹ The 2004 Pew/Internet study *The Internet and Democratic Debate* found that more than "40% of Americans were getting news and information about politics online."⁴² What's more, the percentage of citizens who are actively seeking political information from Internet-based sources is increasing: in the 2000 election, approximately 7 percent of American voters used the Internet as one source for campaign news; in June 2004, 15 percent of American voters indicated using the Internet as one source.⁴³

Despite this increase in Internet use, however, the majority of Americans still report using more traditional media sources as their primary source for political and campaign information with television (78 percent of citizens) and newspaper (40 percent) far outpacing Internet use. Furthermore, the Internet has not replaced television as citizens' primary source for political and campaign news. Even those respondents who used the Internet as a primary source of campaign news tended to use it as a compliment for other traditional news sources—99 percent of respondents who had ever accessed online political news also got news from traditional media sources (e.g., TV, newspapers).⁴⁴

It must also be noted that the use of the Internet for political information is not equally distributed across the voting population; Delli Carpini and Keeter stated that "the civic potential of the Internet is especially strong among younger Americans."⁴⁵ A *Project Vote Smart* national survey found that some 70 percent of eighteen to twenty-five year olds believed political and campaign information found on the Internet was useful compared to only 48 percent of those over twenty-five.⁴⁶ Data have also indicated that young citizens, ages eighteen to twenty-nine, are more than twice as likely as those fifty years of age and older to get political and campaign news from the Internet.⁴⁷ According to the 2004 Pew/Internet study, however, "this disparity is driven largely by the fact that a much higher proportion of young people use the Internet in the first place" and that among Internet users, "those under 30 are only slightly more likely to use the web as a source of election news...."⁴⁸

There is also some evidence that those citizens who are already politically active are most likely to seek out and use online political and campaign information. Delli Carpini suggested that the Internet may have the greatest influence on those who are already politically engaged because of reduced time costs associated with information seeking.⁴⁹ A 1999 Pew Research Center study seemed to confirm this supposition when it reported that political knowledge levels were greatest among those respondents who followed politics and who went online for news.

Those respondents who followed politics 'most of the time' and who went online for political news scored a full point (on an 8-point scale) higher on a measure of political knowledge. This interaction effect (politics with Internet use) was even greater for citizens ages eighteen to twenty-nine and was the single greatest predictor of participants' political knowledge.⁵⁰

Several studies have called into question the basic premise that simply providing access to more political information—via the Internet, for example—is a guarantee of either increased civic engagement or more informed, effective citizenship. These studies point to the unevenness of information that is available (i.e., the veracity of information Web sites) and the tendency for online information seekers to seek out political information to support points-of-view they already held rather than to engage in deliberative decision-making.⁵¹ Levine cautioned that the "worst of the [political Web] sites make political debate crude and visceral, reducing participation and expression to fairly meaningless mouse clicks."⁵² Norris concluded that evidence suggested that the Internet may serve to reinforce existing patterns of political participation, and perhaps even widen, the gap between the information rich and the information poor.⁵³ Hill and Hughes argued that those who sought information on the Internet, were self-selecting—they only visited sites for specific information or to interact with people of like-mind. Thus, Hill and Hughes concluded, the belief that the Internet changes individuals is misguided as it only allows them to engage in the same political behavior, but through a different medium.⁵⁴ The 2002 Pew/Internet study polled members of the "online citizenry" and found that "on the whole, the opinions that online citizenry possesses when it logs on tend to be reinforced, not altered, by the information it encounters, and the activities it engages in."⁵⁵

In fact, Delli Carpini and Keeter cautioned, a broad general knowledge characterizes truly informed citizens, and the Internet can discourage the acquisition of such broad knowledge. Because most citizens tend to be political generalists rather than political specialists, "the population is better described as general information haves and have-nots rather than as a collection of selectively informed issue publics."⁵⁶ Delli Carpini and Keeter argued that one possible impact of "the new information environment is to discourage the kind of information generalist quality that currently characterizes informed citizens" and that this may be because certain aspects of the Internet serve to "reinforce...fragmentation as citizens self-select or are exposed to only those chat groups or other venues frequented by like-minded people."⁵⁷

Other research has also questioned the true impact of online political and campaign information on voting, civic engagement and political knowledge. For example, Kim, in a study of undergraduate Internet users

found that “there was no significant relationship between Internet use and political knowledge.”⁵⁸ While this study had a relatively small sample size, its results do call into question the assumption that accessing information online necessarily contributes to increased political knowledge.

What of the political information Internet users do find online? The 2002 Pew/Internet study found that of those who sought online information about candidates in the 2002 congressional elections, only 25 percent found any information that made them decide to vote for or against one candidate. Only about one-third of the online citizens polled indicated the information they found online was somewhat helpful in deciding who and what to vote for. This proportion was down from both the 2000 election (39 percent) and the 1998 elections (36 percent).⁵⁹ Evidence presented in the same study showed that “online citizens, as a whole, are a dissatisfied bunch,” in large part due to the fact that citizens looking for useful political information were less likely to find it than those who sought other kind of information online (e.g., health-related information).⁶⁰

Bimber, using Internet survey data from 1996-1999, found that obtaining political and campaign information online exerted no effect on voting behavior. “Even citizens who pursue political information (online) were no more likely to vote than were demographically similar citizens with Internet access who did not acquire campaign information (online).”⁶¹ Interestingly, Bimber found that obtaining political or campaign information online was predictive of only one type of participation as defined by the National Election Survey categories: donating money to a group or candidate. Bimber summarized this lack of impact by stating that despite the greater access to information—at lower costs—available to citizens online, “except for being somewhat more likely to give money, those who make use of this information are no more likely to vote or to be politically active” and thus there is “very little to show for this otherwise remarkable technological phenomenon in terms of aggregate political engagement.”⁶²

Research on the Impact of the Internet on Other Forms of Civic Engagement

As noted earlier, voting constitutes but one form of civic engagement. According to Michael Delli Carpini, director of Public Policy at The Pew Charitable Trusts, civic engagement consists of: individual and/or collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern and can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. Civic engagement may encompass a range of activities, such as working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, or writing a letter to an elected official or voting.⁶³

What has been the impact of the Internet on forms of civic engagement other than voting? Again, results from empirical studies examining these questions have been mixed. Some theorize that the "civic web at its best...can foster genuine civic engagement both online and off"⁶⁴ and that "while not a panacea...the Internet may nevertheless represent an important new venue...to counter declining civic engagement in America."⁶⁵ Others are not so optimistic in their analysis of the impact of the Internet on civic participation. Winner has noted that the Internet has brought about a change in the "cultural manifestations of democracy" but wonders whether "networked computing improves the quantity and quality of citizen participation." Winner went on to conclude that while to a visible and vocal minority "the Internet is a godsend," most citizens remain relatively unaffected by it and that the "participation trend does not seem especially hopeful."⁶⁶ Gates, in his introduction to a special issue of *National Civic Review* devoted to technology and civic engagement, asked the pertinent questions: "what is technology doing to civic engagement and the building of community?" and "what can technology do for civic engagement?"⁶⁷

Some evidence has indicated that citizens who use the Internet are more likely to engage in new and different types of civic engagement. The Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet found that 44 percent of online citizens (defined as a cadre of politically active citizens who use the Internet to influence politics and campaigns) were engaged in types of civic participation they had not been previously (e.g., working for a campaign). What's more, the study found that these online citizens tended to wield a 'multiplier effect' in that their increased participation had an influence on the civic participation of others. This study also found that online citizens were five times more likely to write or call a politician and three times more likely to write a letter to the editor than citizens who were not online.⁶⁸

Other studies support these findings. Shah, Kwak, and Holbert found that across age cohorts (baby boomers versus younger citizens), citizens who used the Internet for information exchange reported (after controlling for confounding variables) higher levels of civic engagement.⁶⁹ Weber and Bergman reported that citizens engaged in online activities such as e-mail and chat rooms were more likely to be involved in a range of political activities than citizens who were not online. However, these results should be interpreted cautiously as the sample in this particular study was self-selected.⁷⁰

In spite of these findings, however, some question remains as to the real impact of the Internet on civic engagement. Indeed, some studies refute the findings noted above. For example, Jennings and Zeitner used multivariate analysis to determine that frequency of Internet use was sta-

training grounds for the exercise of voice—a traditional function of Toquevillean associations.”⁷⁸

Proponents of the Internet’s potential for supporting civic dialogue often point to the ‘commons’ nature of cyberspace. For example, Levine summarized Rheingold’s description of the profound friendships and networks of support that grew out of WELL, a San Francisco computer network that functioned—more or less—as a commons.⁷⁹ Levine, however, questioned whether the Internet was actually responsible for this *bon ami*, and concluded “there is insufficient evidence to prove that more widespread use of the cybercommons would revive American civil society.”⁸⁰ Galston noted that it was unlikely that true ‘communities’ could develop in cyberspace but he did note that it may be possible to create voluntary communities based on similar interests (e.g., commerce, chat rooms, etc.) rather than the traditional geography constraints. Because the Internet provides few barriers to entry and exit, people can form ‘communities’ around “interests rather than proximity” (e.g., buying a home); but Galston argued that this also means that such groups can never become true communities because individuals often use exit (i.e., disengaging from the dialogue) as a response to dissenting views and because their individualistic nature does not foster mutual obligation nor lay the groundwork for sacrifice—two key components of a community.⁸¹

Internet proponents have also pointed to the potential of the Web log, or ‘blog.’ Blogs are online journals maintained by individuals (‘bloggers’) and often updated daily or even hourly. Blogs often appear as a person’s open diary, chronicling any commentary a person wants to share with the world. In this way, blogs have been touted as a variation on the syndicated newspaper column or a form of ‘letter-to-the-editor.’ Indeed, many bloggers post commentary on political issues and current events, and some blogs even resemble news magazines in the breadth and scope of their commentary (see, for example, Blog for America at <http://www.blogforamerica.com/>). Some argue that “the explosion of blogs has blown a needed hole...in the major editorial pages and the Sunday talk shows” of the mainstream media.⁸² Others argue that the blog lends itself to political campaigning. Rice concluded that “one of the major advancement in campaign technology this year [2004] was blogging, which [Howard] Dean used first and most effectively.”⁸³

Critics of the format argue that blogs, by their very nature, are antithetical to deliberation and dialogue because they are “atomized, fragmentary, and of the instant” and thus lack the needed depth to facilitate deliberation. Thus, blogs may not represent “a new way of doing politics.”⁸⁴ Levine noted that, in this, blogs suffer the same shortcoming as much of the Web in that “to a large extent, web pages seem to have become an inexpensive form of press release.”⁸⁵

tistically *insignificant* for nearly all civic engagement indicators and any apparent increase could be explained by an increase in engagement by one group alone: those already predisposed to civic engagement. In other words, rather than increasing all citizen involvement, Internet use led those who were already predisposed to be engaged to get *more* engaged, while those who were not engaged, remained so.⁷¹

An important aspect of civic engagement is the degree to which citizens engage in meaningful discussion and deliberation of questions of public policy. Indeed, John Dewey used the degree to which citizens felt a desire to stand on their street corners to discuss and debate the issues of the day as his litmus test for the health of a democracy. Dewey wrote “the strongest point that can be made about the even rudimentary forms democracy has already attained...is that to some extent they involve consultation and discussion which uncover social needs and troubles.”⁷² David Broder has written that the key ingredient that distinguishes an anarchic mob from a responsible public is “the opportunity for deliberation.... It is the dialogue that makes for democracy.”⁷³ The Internet, with its freewheeling, open source structure—chat rooms and UseNet groups are two perfect examples—would appear to hold great potential for facilitating such debate and dialogue.

Recent studies have called this potential into question, however. Charles White, writing at the outset of the proliferation of the Internet, concluded that the Internet did “not yet provide places for deliberation” but rather the Internet provided “places for faceless individuals to express (often, to shout) anonymous views.” White concluded that true deliberation cannot be conducted in private, but must be advanced and defended in the full light of public scrutiny, not in the shadows of electronic anonymity.⁷⁴ Winner argued that unlike face-to-face disagreements which often end with compromise, the Internet encourages “people of similar viewpoints” to talk to each other and when “diverse voices and viewpoints do emerge” they are often met “with criticism and harshness that is characteristic in some online discussions.”⁷⁵

Is the Internet truly fertile ground for political deliberation? Sustain, in a summary of studies done in more than a dozen nations, concluded that when like-minded people engaged in discussions with other like-minded people both groups were more likely to adopt extreme rather than moderate versions of their shared beliefs. Sustain found that this phenomenon was exacerbated when the discussion occurred—as it often does on the Internet—anononymously.⁷⁶ Wilhelm found that online discussions were often dominated by a small number of individuals with similar ideas and ideologies, and therefore did not support real deliberation.⁷⁷ Galston was skeptical of the Internet’s potential to communicate a public voice and that “it is unlikely that on-line groups will serve as significant

Anderson cautioned against several misconceptions regarding the Internet. One of these was the mistaken notion, in Anderson's view, that the Internet is "essentially about providing information...to enable individuals to make decisions."⁸⁶ Anderson went on to state that the Internet was essentially about relationships, "interactions between individuals and individuals, individuals and organizations, and organizations and organizations" and that the interactive nature of the Internet "makes these relationships possible."⁸⁷ Anderson's view echoed Delany who stressed that "organizations across the country are learning to use the Internet for campaigns about issues rather than about candidates" and that this could be the "real Internet revolution."⁸⁸ In an interview given on National Public Radio in 1999, Steve Clift of Minnesota E-Democracy argued that "the Net is best used at this stage...to assemble and coordinate, not to persuade."⁸⁹ Has the Internet proven to be—as these authors suggest—a fertile ground for networking and issue advocacy?

Some evidence suggests it has. Jim Buie has written about twenty-two case studies of successful online citizen activism⁹⁰ including Nobel laureate Jody Williams' successful campaign to ban land mines (<http://www.icbl.org/campaign/history>), and the Protect Our Heritage postcard campaign (<http://www.ourforests.org/>) that resulted in 150,000 postcards being sent to then Vice President Gore. The continued presence of MoveOn.org as an Internet icon is a more recent example. MoveOn began as a response to the Clinton impeachment process. In 1998, two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs posted "an online petition to 'Censure President Clinton and Move On to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation.' Within days they had hundreds of thousands of individuals signed up, and began looking for ways these voices could be heard."⁹¹ MoveOn has existed as a conduit for advocacy groups since that time. In their own words, MoveOn exists because "there is a disconnect between broad public opinion and legislative action, MoveOn builds electronic advocacy groups. Examples of such issues are campaign finance, environmental and energy issues, media consolidation, or the Iraq war."⁹²

What has been the impact of such online issue advocacy? Some argue that the change has been incremental at best. Bimber, for example, found that the Internet was "accelerating the process of issue group formation and action, leaving the structure of political power in the U.S. altered, but not revolutionized or qualitatively transformed into a new epoch of democracy."⁹³

What of the role of the Internet in developing citizen networks and in facilitating citizen activism? Taylor, Kent, and White described the Internet "as one of the essential tools for activist and nonprofit organiza-

tions.”⁹⁴ In their study of activist groups’ communications, they found that activist organizations had harnessed the networking capacity of the Internet, and this networking had, to some degree, “equalized the power gap between powerful organizations and powerless individuals” and that “at the most basic level, the presence of activist organizations on the Internet gives them equality in status to corporations.”⁹⁵ Moreover, the Internet presence of activist groups was increasing, they concluded, because the Internet offered activist groups “something unique...an unobstructed path between publics and organizations.”⁹⁶ Using the results of a survey of Internet users, Cornfield and Rainie documented the rise of such non-partisan special interest sites as key sources of information and mobilization for activist and advocacy groups.⁹⁷

Other studies have suggested as much. Both Bimber and Norris found that the Internet may have its greatest impact outside the realm of traditional political participation by increasing pluralism or by facilitating protest activities. Tolbert and McNeal studied the development of the Internet from 1996 to 2000 and found that the substantial growth in Internet use only hinted at its potential mobilizing impact.⁹⁸ Stanley and Weare reached slightly different conclusions in their study when they found that while the Internet might not have motivated individuals politically, evidence did suggest that the Internet opened up issue networks to new voices and interests.⁹⁹

Perhaps the most famous episode of online networking and citizen activism involved Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign. Very early in his campaign, Dean’s advisors saw the potential for using the Internet to recruit people to the campaign, specifically, the Web site Meetup.com. Meetup.com coordinates and organizes groups whose interests range from scrapbooking in Singapore to political activism. These groups (including the Dean group) organized gatherings nationwide as a way to introduce themselves, or to ‘meetup.’ By the time Dean’s campaign had run its course, more than 150,000 people had been recruited to the campaign via Meetup.com. Dean’s campaign manager, Joe Trippi stated “the largest component spreading the word—both in money and organization—are the Meetup folks. Meetup has been incredible. Just incredible.”¹⁰⁰

Cornfield provided a compelling case study of Internet-based activism, both pro and con. He described his Web-based efforts to organize a protest of the runway policies of Washington National (now Reagan National) airport in Washington, D.C. His quest started with enthusiasm for, as he stated:

I thought the Internet would help me find, consolidate, and motivate this coalition. No senator could bottle up this decentralized network. I saw individuals communicating back and forth at will.... Then, at the click of a mouse, the coalition would spring to life, showering dollars, talking points, and pledged votes at the next election.... Was this too much to expect? I would not know unless I tried.¹⁰¹

Apparently, in Cornfield's case, it was too much to expect. After nearly a year of attempting to mobilize and organize, Cornfield's CAAN (Citizens for the Abatement of Aircraft Noise) was unsuccessful at getting the runway policy changed. Cornfield drew several lessons from this experience and not all of them bode well for those who see the Internet as a giant vehicle for citizen activism. Cornfield concluded that while the Internet supplied him and his group with access to all sorts of "keyword knowledge"—the information they needed to wage their fight—it did nothing to increase their "password knowledge"—their understanding of, and access to, the policy-making segment of the government. Without this password knowledge, Cornfield argued, the Internet cannot contribute much to the success of activists. Cornfield concluded that "realism bids us not to rely solely on bypassing the political system."¹⁰²

Research on the Rise of E-Government (e-gov)

What exactly is e-gov? Curtin defined e-gov as "all forms of information and communication technology by which governments and their agents enhance operations, the delivery of services...citizen engagement and participation, and the very process of governance."¹⁰³ What has been the promise of information technology in the practice of governance? What impact has the Internet had on how citizens and their governments interact?

Proponents of e-gov argue that its promise is significant. Torgas found that e-gov could "become a way for our federal, intergovernmental system to align itself...so that every voice is heard, every resource identified and wisely invested."¹⁰⁴ Torgas went on to note that "the ease with which e-gov makes it possible for citizens to contact a government official will result in profuse expression of opinion and concern."¹⁰⁵ Others have argued that e-gov can work to make our federal government more responsive to citizens because Internet technology makes it easier for citizens to register opinions on national public policy in ways unheard of even a decade ago. Moreover, the Internet can provide citizens with much needed information to make intelligent decisions on such issues.¹⁰⁶ Curtin et al. concluded that recent studies have found that, "by its nature, e-government makes all government activities everywhere more responsive to real citizen needs...irrespective of whether governments are presently democratic or not."¹⁰⁷

Citizens themselves have begun to see the potential benefits of e-gov. For example, in a 2002 study by the Council on Excellence in Government 64 percent of citizens believed that e-gov would have a positive impact on government operations, and 78 percent believed that e-gov would improve the United States' preparedness for national emergencies. The same study found that 56 percent of all Americans (and 76 percent

of frequent Internet users) had visited a government Web site. A majority of government leaders (64 percent) also believed that e-gov would have a positive impact.¹⁰⁸

A second study by the Council on Excellence in Government—conducted in 2003—found that citizens reported tangible benefits to using e-gov. Seventy-five percent of citizens who used e-gov in some form believed it made it more convenient and easier to stay informed and 67 percent felt it made conducting transactions with government easier.¹⁰⁹ One example of this can be seen in the city of Indianapolis' Web portal. The portal provides "almost seamless integration of agency and department functions."¹¹⁰ The e-gov resources are so comprehensive, that former Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith asked publicly why, in the future, any citizen would have need of a trip to city hall.¹¹¹

A second case study of successful e-gov can be seen in Washington's State Department of Licensing. Stephens reported that the Department began its efforts by posting the master business license application and has now expanded its efforts to online applications for driver's licenses and license plate renewals for all 5.5 million Washington residents. The result has been a significant decrease in time each citizen must spend at the Department and a decrease in the resources needed to serve each applicant.¹¹²

However, some evidence has indicated that e-gov (particularly at the local and state government level) may not be as prevalent as these clear success stories would indicate. Fountain found that only twenty-four states provided Internet access to key services such as license renewal and tax filing. The most common Internet service provided, in fact, was applying for a government job (thirty-two states).¹¹³ Musso in a study of 270 municipal Web sites in California, found that most municipal sites provided very few features and lacked a clear mission, and these shortcomings prevented any meaningful change in the way citizens interacted with their local governments.¹¹⁴

A 2004 Pew Internet and American Life study concluded that "e-gov is not yet the 'killer app' among available tools to contact government."¹¹⁵ The study found that the Internet's main benefit was in arming citizens with more information and that this did help citizens navigate through government more efficiently. Only 37 percent of 'government patrons,' however, preferred e-mail or Internet contact with government, with 53 percent still preferring contact by phone. In addition, the study concluded, not all problems lend themselves easily to e-gov solutions: "real-time interaction is preferred when people have urgent or complex problems to sort out with government."¹¹⁶

Some have theorized that e-gov may itself be antithetical to the democratic process—at least as it has become manifest in the American

case. Nugent noted that, "unlike the Internet, American political institutions are not built for speed. The deliberative process of a legislative body is not intended to be efficient; indeed it would suffer from being made so."¹¹⁷ White also asked whether the assumption that more direct contact with—and influence of—elected officials (a move to more 'direct' democracy, if you will) ran counter to the version of American Federalism outlined in the U.S. Constitution.¹¹⁸ Grossman pointed out that calls for a more direct democracy, via the Internet, have failed to consider that such a democracy was something the founders feared. Indeed, the founders specifically addressed fears of a tyranny of the masses by creating a republic.¹¹⁹ Noted political theorist Robert Dahl has written that the capacity of new technology to make information about public issues instantaneously available to citizens "can be used to damage democratic values and the democratic process, or it can be used to promote them" and that it will take a "conscious and deliberate effort" to make new technology such as e-gov work for, rather than against, democracy.¹²⁰

Perhaps these results should come as no surprise. As Nugent noted, "for all its importance, the Internet has not remade the American political landscape."¹²¹ This was due, in part, McChesney concluded, to the fact that:

Every new electronic media technology this century, from film, AM radio, shortwave radio, and facsimile broadcasting to FM radio, terrestrial television broadcasting, cable TV, and satellite broadcasting, has spawned similar utopian notions. In each case, to varying degrees, visionaries have told us how these new magical technologies...would open the way for a more egalitarian and just society.¹²²

Conclusions

What, if any, conclusions can we take from this review? Clearly the evidence reviewed suggests a very mixed bag of results. It does seem safe to conclude, however, that the impact of the Internet on civic engagement has not met the expectations of its proponents. Indeed, a number of more recent studies have called into question some of the basic assumptions of these proponents. For example, several studies have found that those who used the Internet to access political information were no more likely to vote or to participate in other forms of civic engagement than those who did not use the Internet. On a more positive note, evidence has suggested that the Internet has begun to function as a communication network for grassroots organizations and activist networks. Clearly, the explosion of issue advocacy group Web sites supports these findings.

If civic engagement requires discourse and dialogue, however, then the Internet appears to have failed, ironically, to advance this type of participation as well. The evidence suggests that this kind of deliberation is

often actively squelched in the political chat rooms that abound in cyberspace. Moreover, because those who populate these political chat rooms tend to be swayed to more (and not less) extreme positions, these chat rooms appear to function less like marketplaces for ideas and more like training grounds for ideologues on both sides of the political spectrum. Finally, evidence suggests that a number of citizens are engaging with their elected officials at the local, state, and federal level via e-gov. Whether renewing a driver's license online or e-mailing a senator, many citizens have established stronger contact with their government through the Internet. In spite of this, however, the promise of e-gov appears to have remained largely unfulfilled.

So is the glass half-full or half-empty? At this point, while still difficult to say, I find myself coming down on the half-empty side of the ledger. Given the high expectations associated with the evolution of the Internet (perhaps too high), its marginal impact on civic engagement seems especially small. Indeed, a number of studies have characterized the impact of the Internet on civic engagement as simply "old wine in new bottles." In other words, evidence has indicated that the Internet has become a useful tool for those who are already civically active, but has done little to encourage increased participation among the rest of the citizenry.

Thus, it seems safe to draw one final conclusion: that Grossman's 'electronic republic' has, for the most part, failed to come to fruition. All fanfare aside, current evidence suggests that the Internet has been responsible for bringing about, at best, only marginal changes in the way Americans 'do' citizenship. The majority of empirical studies that have been conducted suggest that citizens' use of the Internet—in its many varied forms—has had little impact on the quantity and quality of most Americans' civic engagement. Clearly, Grossman's lofty vision of an electronic republic where "through the use of increasingly sophisticated two-way...communications networks" citizens will be able to "participate directly in the making of laws and policies by which they are governed" has not come to pass. In fact, the emergence of Internet technologies has had exactly the same impact on levels of American civic engagement as did the telegraph, the telephone, and television: little to none. Levels of most aspects of civic engagement have not increased in appreciable ways since the advent of the Internet, and the areas where civic engagement may have increased may not necessarily have a positive impact (e.g., the tendency of chat rooms to be populated only by like-minded people; facilitating increased campaign contributions, etc.). It is certainly possible that new research conducted on data concerning the presidential election of 2004 will alter these findings. It very well may be that new studies will show significant increases in civic engagement associated with Internet

use, thus increasing the glass to more than half-full; but that is not the current case. Up until this point, the somewhat utopian expectation that our civic society could be improved simply by “add[ing] Internet and stir” has not been realized—as Winner concluded “what we are witnessing is not the revitalization of democratic politics” because, unfortunately, “the Internet has done little so far to affect the fundamental ways that society is governed.”¹²³

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