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If you build a political website, will they come?

The supply and demand model of new technology, social capital, and civic engagement in Britain.

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Synopsis: The core issue for this study concerns the social and political consequences of the rise of knowledge societies, in particular the capacity of the Internet for strengthening democratic participation, social capital, and civic engagement in Britain. To consider these issues, *Part I* summarizes debates about the impact of the Internet on the public sphere. The main influence of this development, 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 habitual 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, voluntary associations, and interest groups, more than upon conventional channels of political participation, exemplified by voting, parties, and election campaigns. *Part II* summarizes the sources of data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the British Social Attitudes Survey, 2003. *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, society, and democracy.

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The rise of knowledge societies represents one of the most profound transformations that have 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 such as the United States, Sweden, and Britain, but the Internet has also been widely regarded as an important instrument for social change in poorer nations around the globe (UN 2002; Franda 2002). The core issue for this study concerns the social and political consequences of the rise of knowledge societies, in particular the capacity of the Internet for strengthening democratic participation, social capital, and civic engagement.

To consider these issues, *Part I* summarizes debates about the impact of the Internet on the public sphere. The main influence of this development, 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 and social 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, voluntary associations, and interest groups, more than upon conventional channels of political participation, exemplified by voting, parties, and election campaigns. *Part II* summarizes the sources of data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the British Social Attitudes Survey, 2003. *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, society, and democracy.

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, and plebiscites, and the mobilization of virtual communities, thereby revitalizing levels of mass participation in public affairs (Budge 1996, Schwartz 1996, Rash 1997, Rheingold 1993, Barber 1998). 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 society and democracy continues to be expressed by enthusiasts today (Gilder 2000). For example, Hauben and Hauben (1997) argue that by bringing people together, the Internet can help rebuild a sense of community and trust (see also Wellman and Guilia, 1999). Empirical backing for this view has come from analysis of the Pew Internet and American Life Project which suggests that Internet users had wider social networks than non-users (Ranney, 2000; Robinson et al, 2000; Pew 2001; Uslaner 2004), a result that has been replicated by the British Social Attitudes survey (Gardner and Oswald, 2001).

Moreover the general claim that the knowledge society will revive civic life in local communities and 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 substantial disparities exist in who becomes involved in digital politics. 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 (Davis 1999, Davis and Owen 1998, Wilhelm 2001, Hill and Hughes 1998; Selnow 1998; Toulouse and Luke 1998). The Internet is a medium of choice par excellence, so it seems improbable that political websites, chat-rooms and online news will reach many citizens who are otherwise disengaged, apathetic and 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 (Johnson and Kaye 2003; Bonfadelli 2002). In this regard, the Internet seems analogous to the segmented magazine market, where some subscribe to *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Economist* and *Foreign Affairs*, but others pick *Golfing Weekly* or *Playboy*.

The knowledge elite and social inequalities

Despite those who believe that the new technologies can enrich social capital and civic engagement, there are also plenty of skeptical voices about these claims. 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, generating deeper divisions between the information rich and poor. In this perspective, the global and social divides in Internet access mean that, far from encouraging mass participation, the knowledge society will disproportionately benefit the most affluent sectors in the developed world (Golding 1996; Murdock and Golding 1989; Hayward 1995; Weber, Loumakis and Bergman 2003). Despite the great potential for technological innovations leading towards political change, observers suggests that in established democracies, traditional interest groups and governments have the capacity to reassert their control in the virtual political sphere; just as traditional multinational corporations have the ability to reestablish their predominance in the world of e-commerce (Hill and Hughes 1998; Selnow 1998; Toulouse and Luke 1998; McChesney 1999). In authoritarian regimes, as well, studies have found that access to publishing and disseminating information on the Internet, and also access, can be strictly restricted by governments, such as limitations imposed in Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and China (Boas 2000; Drake, Kalathil and Boas 2000; Hill and Hughes 1999; Kalathil and Boas 2003). If political resources on the Internet reinforce the voice and influence of the more affluent sectors, this could reinforce existing political disparities and class biases common in democratic societies.

One common concern about the impact of new ICTs on social capital is that a zero-sum game could be at work, if new technologies serve to replace, rather than supplement, older face-to-face forms of human communication. For example, Nie and Erbring (2000) report that heavy internet users report reducing their social ties, while Kraut et al. (1998) argue that heavy Internet use results in people becoming more depressed and having fewer friends. Although remaining agnostic about the evidence, Putnam has raised the possibility that passive use of the Internet could potentially have the same deleterious effect on social capital that he believes has already been produced by television entertainment (Putnam, 2000: Chap. 13). In turn, strong social capital is thought to promote community and civic engagement, ultimately serving to strengthen good governance. In short, some studies suggest that far from being a technological 'magic bullet' that can fix humdrum civic ills, the Internet may even exacerbate them. Therefore claims for the potential of the knowledge society to revitalize mass participation or strong democracies have found little support from many of the available empirical studies.

Politics as usual

An alternative perspective, which has become more commonly heard in recent years, is articulated by cyber-skeptics who argue that both these visions are exaggerated. In this view, so far the potential of the knowledge society has failed to have a dramatic impact on the practical reality of 'politics as usual', for good or ill, even in countries such as the United States at the forefront of digital technologies (Margolis and Resnick 2000). This perspective stresses the embedded status quo and the difficulties of achieving radical change to political systems through technological mechanisms. For example, commentators suggest that during the 2000 American election campaign, George W. Bush and Al Gore used their web pages essentially as glossy

shop-windows, as fundraising tools, and as campaign ads, rather than as interactive 'bottom up' formats facilitating public comment and discussion (Media Matrix 2000; Foot and Schneider 2002). During the 2003 presidential election in the United States, the fund-raising function also seems to have predominated for the Howard Dean campaign, as well as for the Kerry-Edwards website.

Elsewhere, content analysis of political party websites in countries as diverse as the UK, France, Mexico and the Republic of Korea have found that their primary purpose has been the provision of standard information about party organizations and policies that was also widely available offline, providing more of the same, rather than anything new, still less interactive facilities: "*Party presence on the internet seems to represent largely an additional element to a party's repertoire of action along with more traditional communication forms rather than a transformation of the fundamental relationship between political parties and the public, as some earlier advocates of cyber democracy hoped.*" (Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003). Studies of the content of government department websites in many countries at the forefront of the move towards e-governance, such as the United States, Canada and India, and surveys of users of these websites, have also found that these are often primarily used for the dissemination of information and the provision of routine administrative services. The Internet thereby serves as an aid to good governance, by increasing government transparency, efficiency, and customer-oriented service delivery, although this can serve both authoritarian regimes such as Singapore as well as more democratic societies. But the Internet does not necessarily function so effectively as a medium facilitating citizen consultation, policy discussion, or other democratic inputs into the policymaking process (Stowers 1999; Thomas and Streib 2003; Allen, Jullet and Roy 2001; Haque 2002; Chadwick and May 2003; Fountain 2001). Technology, in the skeptical view, is a plastic medium that flows into, and adapts to, pre-existing social molds and political functions.

The political market model

The last theoretical perspective – and the one developed in this study – can be characterized as the political market model. In this account, the impact of the knowledge society depends upon the interaction between the 'top-down' 'supply' of information and communications made available via the internet, e-mail and world wide web from civic institutions, notably community websites, government departments, parliaments, political parties, the news media, voluntary associations, interest groups, and social movements, and upon 'demand' in the use of this information and communications among the online public.

This model suggests that, in turn, 'demand' depends upon the prior social characteristics of the online population, especially the preponderance of younger, well-educated citizens who are commonly among the heaviest users of the Internet, as well as their habitual political interests and propensities. The theory suggests that, given these assumptions, use of the Internet in the public sphere is most likely to strengthen and reinforce cause-oriented and civic-oriented dimensions of political activism, which are more popular among the younger generation, while having far less impact upon traditional channels of participation through voting and election campaigns, which are more common forms of activism among the middle-aged as well as the well educated (Norris 2001, 2002; Curtice and Seyd 2003).

Moreover 'supply' is not constant, so that patterns of website usage and online participation need monitoring over successive elections. The social and political uses of the Internet have been evolving since the introduction of the first graphical browser a decade ago, just as it took many years for election broadcasts to emerge in their modern form on British television. During the 1996 US presidential elections and the 1998 mid-term campaign, for example, there were few opportunities to donate funds online via a secure server on the candidate and party websites, even if supporters felt so inclined (Kamarck and Nye 1999). This facility expanded in 2000, before becoming one of the central functions of the Kerry and Bush websites, emulating Howard Dean's fund-raising success, during the 2004 primaries. The change in fund-raising tactics can be attributed to both 'demand' (the propensity of the electorate to make

donations due to heightened interest during the heated Kerry-Bush campaign) and also to supply-side innovations in the use of new technologies (the ease and facility of transferring financial donations online) and the legal context (regulating large campaign contributions). In the same way, the publication of campaign 'blogs' -- online journals announcing news, events, and commentary by campaign staffers, candidate supporters, and journalists -- only became ubiquitous during the most recent US campaign, generating new forms of participation for activists and the attentive public¹.

Therefore rather than accepting that either everything will change as radical forms of direct democracy come to replace the traditional channels of representative governance (as optimists originally hoped), that the digital divide will reinforce socio-economic disparities in politics (as pessimists predicted), or alternatively that nothing will change as the digital world merely replicates 'politics as usual' (as the skeptics suggest), the market model suggests that it is more sensible to identify what particular types of democratic practices could be strengthened in the political system by the rise of the knowledge society, given the characteristics of users, understanding that these developments remain an evolving work in process.

Part II: Conceptual framework, evidence, and survey data

Interpretations of existing empirical studies remain divided in part because the results could be conditional upon the characteristics of early Internet adopters, the location of individuals within society, and the particular type of society under comparison. The social functions of new forms of communication vary in different types of communities, for example among isolated rural areas and tight-knit urban neighborhoods, or between sprawling suburban commuter-belts and inner-city council estates (Jones 1998). The variations in patterns of use by different social groups are well-established; for example, while Nie and Erbring (2000) suggest that online activities generate social isolation, in the Pew study (2002) women reported that use of the Internet had actually strengthened family ties, especially communication among extended or physically-distant family members.

Moreover it remains unclear how far the results of the existing research on these issues in the United States are conditioned by the particular characteristics of American society, or how far the findings hold elsewhere. One way to explore this issue is to consider the evidence for the uses and functions of the Internet in Britain, a similar affluent post-industrial service economy sharing strong cultural links with America, although also with significant national differences, exemplified in Britain by the parliamentary system of government, the media system with a strong role for public service broadcasting and a more partisan press, and general patterns of higher electoral turnout, mass-branch party activism, and slightly lower associational membership (Norris 2003).

To explore the impact of the Internet access upon political activism, this paper draws upon the first results of a new multi-wave research project based on a special battery of items, contained in the British Social Attitudes 2003, monitoring use of the Internet, social capital, and civic engagement. The core items will eventually be repeated in two subsequent waves of the BSA surveys, allowing the evolution of the Internet to be monitored over time.

The survey gauged contemporary Internet access at home and at work, as well as measuring a variety of ways of using new communication and information technologies. To illustrate the baseline population, Figure 1 shows how far people use the Internet in the British sample. Overall, almost half (47%) of respondents never used the Internet, so that 53% went online in Britain, either at home, at work, or somewhere else. This proportion is about 8-10 percent less than the comparable figure in America during the equivalent period, as monitored by the Pew Internet & American Life Project². Among the online population in Britain, just over one quarter (28%) had access only at home, while about one quarter had access both at home and at work, and a few (4%) only accessed the Internet at work. These estimates confirm, as expected, that Internet access currently remains lower in Britain than in the United States. Nevertheless the

Pew surveys suggest that for the last few years American Internet access appears to have stabilized at around two-thirds of the U.S. population, while by contrast Figure 2 indicates that in Britain personal use of the Internet has not yet hit a ceiling and indeed continues to expand slightly in recent years, albeit at a slower rate than earlier.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

As Internet use has diffused more widely in Britain, the social composition of the online population has become less distinctive in its higher educational background and younger age profile, although analysis of the social characteristics of the online population by Bromley (2004) confirms that important digital divides in Internet access remain in Britain, as commonly found elsewhere (Wilhelm 1999, Norris 2001). This means that any multivariate analysis of the impact of Internet use needs to control for the prior characteristics of users, including their age, sex, race, education, and social class. Nevertheless, with only cross-sectional survey data it remains difficult to isolate and disentangle the impact of access to the Internet from the social background of users. Controlled large-scale experiments confirm that people in Britain can acquire valuable campaign information from using the Internet, just as they can learn from other news media (Norris and Sanders 2003). But we lack other experiments or time-series panel survey data in Britain which monitor changes in political attitudes and behavior as a result of the experience of using the Internet.

The BSA-2003 does provide a proxy indicator, however, by monitoring when people reported that they first went online. This makes it possible to compare the groups who are and are not currently online, as well as to compare the group who have only recently started to use the Internet with the early adopters, who commenced using the Internet five or more years ago (i.e. prior to 1998). Any effect from the cumulative experience of using the Internet should be apparent if we find some significantly different political attitudes and behavior among these groups, for example, if more experienced users acquire civic skills and social networks online which encourage them to become more active in community affairs. Figure 3 illustrates some of these common contrasts, for example the greater use of the Internet for email, banking, and general information among the most experienced users. At the same time we need to be cautious about drawing any strong inferences based on length of experience in using the Internet, because the online population has gradually 'normalized' in its characteristics, becoming more representative of the general public. As a result, if the novice users of the Internet are more socially typical than experienced users, it remains unclear whether any contrasts between the more and less experienced user groups can be attributed to exposure to the Internet per se, or to the 'normalization' of the online population.

[Figure 3 about here]

If we establish that levels of civic engagement are significantly associated with use of the Internet, we still need to establish a suitable benchmark to evaluate the strength of this relationship. This study therefore compares Internet use with the role of regular newspaper readership. Studies have commonly found that those who habitually use and pay attention to newspapers are significantly more knowledgeable than the average citizen about party policies, civics, and candidates, as well as being more interested in public affairs and more likely to turnout to vote (Miller 1991, Newton 1997, Norris et al. 1999, 113). Similar patterns are commonly found elsewhere, with regular newspaper readers more informed and engaged than average (Norris 2000). The models in this study therefore compare the relationship between Internet use and civic engagement with that between regular newspaper readership and Internet use. Controlling for newspaper readership arguable also provides a way to monitor prior political predispositions.

The design of the items measuring civic engagement are based upon recognition that involvement in public affairs and community politics is multidimensional, with many distinct forms, each associated with differing costs and benefits (Verba et al. 1978, 1995). This study compares the impact of Internet use and newspaper readership on four main dimensions of activism,

namely: voting, campaign-oriented, cause-oriented, and civic-oriented. These are summarized into a 'Political Activism' Index combining all dimensions³. The basic items used to develop this Index are listed in Appendix A.

[Table 1 about here]

Voting in regular elections is one of the most ubiquitous forms of citizen-oriented participation, requiring some initiative and awareness for an informed choice but making fairly minimal demands of time, knowledge and effort. Through the ballot box, voting exerts diffuse pressure over parties and elected officials, and the outcomes of elections affect all citizens. Participating at the ballot box is central to citizenship in representative democracy but due to its relatively low costs the act is atypical of other more demanding forms of participation. The Internet can be expected to encourage voting participation mainly by lowering some of the information hurdles to making an informed choice, although the provision of remote electronic voting through a variety of new technologies can be expected to have a more radical impact upon turnout (Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Norris 2004). Voting participation is measured in the BSA2003 by whether respondents reported that they recalled voting in the 2001 British general election.

Campaign-oriented forms of participation concern acts focused primarily upon how people can influence parliament and government in representative democracy, primarily through political parties in British politics. Verba, Nie and Kim (1978: 46) focus on this aspect when they defined political participation as "...those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take." Work for parties or candidates, including party membership and volunteer work, election leafleting, financial donations to parties or candidates, attending local party meetings, and get-out-the-vote drives, all typify this category. Parties serve multiple functions in representative democracies: notably simplifying and structuring electoral choices; organizing and mobilizing campaigns; aggregating disparate interests; channeling political debate; selecting candidates; structuring parliamentary divisions; acting as policy think tanks; and organizing government. Not only are parties one of the main conduits of political participation, they also serve to boost and strengthen electoral turnout. If mass party membership is under threat, as many indicators suggest, this could have serious implications for representative democracy (Mair and Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2001). Campaigning and party work typically generates collective rather than individual benefits, but requires greater initiative, time, and effort (and sometimes expenditure) than merely casting a ballot. The Internet can be expected to provide new opportunities for activism in parties and election campaigns, for example through downloading information, joining parties or donating funds, or participation in discussion groups hosted on party or candidate websites (Hague and Loader 1999; Norris 2001; Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003).

Experience of campaign-oriented activism is gauged in this study by a three-item scale including whether people are members of a party⁴, whether they express a 'fairly' or 'very' strong party identification, and whether they have ever contacted their MP or MSP. Admittedly, these measures are far from ideal. Party identification is a psychological attitude, rather than form of behavior. Many people contact their MP for reasons which have nothing to do with campaigning per se. Better measures of campaign activism would also gauge typical activities, such as canvassing, donating funds to parties, or attending party meetings. These are intended to be monitored in subsequent BSA surveys following the next British general election, but for the time being the measures used here can be regarded as at least general if far from perfect proxies that are available in the 2003 survey.

Cause-oriented activities are focused primarily upon influencing specific issues and policies. These acts are exemplified by whether respondents have actual experience of taking part in demonstrations and protests, signing a petition, or raising an issue in the news media. The distinction is not water-tight, for example political parties can organize mass demonstrations, and social movements often adopt mixed action strategies which combine traditional repertoires, such as lobbying representatives, with a variety of alternative modes such as online networking, street

protests, and consumer boycotts. Nevertheless compared with campaign-oriented actions, the distinctive aspect of cause-oriented repertoires is that these are most commonly used to pursue specific issues and policy concerns among diverse targets, both within and also well beyond the electoral arena.

These acts seek to influence representative democracies within the nation-state through the conventional channels of contacting elected officials, ministers, civil servants, and government departments, but their target is often broader and more diffuse, possibly in the non-profit or private sectors, whether directed at shaping public opinion and 'life-styles', publicizing certain issues through the news media, mobilizing a networked coalition with other groups or non-profit agencies, influencing the practices of international bodies such as the World Trade Organization or the United Nations, or impacting public policy in other countries.

Experience of cause-oriented activism is measured in this study by a seven-battery item including whether, in response to an unjust or harmful government action, people have signed a petition, spoken to an influential person, contacted a government department, raised the issue in an organization, formed a group of like-minded people, contacted radio, TV or a newspaper about the issue, or gone on a protest or demonstration.

Lastly **civic-oriented** activities, by contrast, involve membership and working together in voluntary associations, as well as collaborating with community groups to solve a local problem. The core claim of 'Toquevillian' theories of social capital is that typical face-to-face deliberative activities and horizontal collaboration within voluntary organizations far removed from the political sphere – exemplified by trade unions, social clubs, and philanthropic groups - promote interpersonal trust, social tolerance and cooperative behavior. In turn, these norms are regarded as cementing the bonds of social life, creating the foundation for building local communities, civil society, and democratic governance. In a 'win-win' situation, participation in associational life is thought to generate individual rewards, such as career opportunities and personal support networks, as well as facilitating community goods, by fostering the capacity of people to work together on local problems. Civic organizations such as unions, churches and community groups, Putnam suggests, play a vital role in the production of social capital where they succeed in bridging divisive social cleavages, integrating people from diverse backgrounds and values, promoting 'habits of the heart' such as tolerance, cooperation and reciprocity, thereby contributing towards a dense, rich and vibrant social infrastructure (Putnam 1993, 1996, 2000, 2002; Pharr and Putnam 2000). This dimension involves direct action within local communities, such as raising funds for a local hospital or school, where the precise dividing line between the 'social' and 'political' breaks down.

Trade unions and churches, in particular, have long been regarded as central pillars of civic society which have traditionally served the function of drawing European citizens into public life. For a variety of reasons - including the way that voluntary associations can strengthen social networks, foster leadership skills, heighten political awareness, create party linkages, and facilitate campaign work - people affiliated with church-based or union organizations can be expected to participate more fully in public life. (Cassel 1999; Radcliff and Davis 2000) Access to the knowledge society can be expected to expand social networks and information, facilitating membership in civic associations and social groups, although the evidence whether the Internet strengthens or weakens social capital remains under debate (Bimber 1998; Horrigan, Rainie and Fox 2001).

Experience of civic activism is measured here by a fourteen-point scale summarizing membership in a series of different types of voluntary organization and associations, focusing mainly upon traditional sectors such as parent-teacher associations, charitable organizations, church groups and social clubs (excluding party membership), although also including some 'new' social movements, exemplified by groups concerned about the environment and about international issues.

The summary **Political Activism** Index, providing an overview, is constructed simply by adding together experience of each of these different types of acts (each coded 0/1). The study has therefore formed additive indices of each item within each of the four groups and also created an additive index across all four groups. It should be noted that the resulting summary index is currently heavily dominated by the civic oriented scale, as this has the most items. Subsequent analysis will see whether any weighting procedure makes any substantial difference to the results. It should also be noted that in this conceptual framework, with the important exception of partisan identification, this study focuses upon political *activity*; we are concerned with *doing* politics rather than being attentive to public affairs or having psychological attitudes thought conducive to civic engagement, such as trust in parliament or a sense of political efficacy, explored elsewhere (Curtice and Norris 2004). The study therefore does not regard exposure or attention to mass communications, exemplified by following political events in newspapers, as indicators of political activism per se. These factors may indeed plausibly contribute towards participation, and thereby help explain this phenomenon, as prior pre-conditions, but they are not, in themselves, channels which citizens can use for expressing political concerns or mobilizing group interests.

Part III: Analysis of the results

We can start by examining the simple bivariate relationships between Internet use and these multidimensional indicators of political activism, with the important proviso that the background of online users continues to be skewed towards the well-educated and more affluent social sectors, which are both resources closely associated with political activism, so that multivariate analysis is required controlling for these factors.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 presents the mean score on these indicators for the group of all Internet users compared with all non-users, and the significance of the difference (estimated by ANOVA). In line with our initial expectations, the results confirm that Internet users in Britain proved significantly more politically engaged than non-users across the indicators of cause-oriented and civic-oriented participation, as well as in the total activism scale. This pattern suggests that the forms of political involvement which are most likely to benefit through the development of the Internet are through single-issue politics, voluntary associations, and community groups, as expected given the prior characteristics of the online population. By contrast, if we compare more traditional forms of engagement, Internet users were slightly less likely to vote than non-users, and there were no significant differences between users and non-users in levels of campaign activism.

The comparison of activism by length of Internet use displays a slightly different pattern, illustrated in Figure 4, where early adopters with the longest experience of going online proved significantly more politically active across all dimensions except voting turnout (where there was no difference) when compared against those who had first ventured online more recently. Yet without any controls it is not possible to determine whether this pattern was due to the effects of length of exposure to the Internet per se, or whether this reflected the gradual changes in the social composition and political attitudes of the Internet population.

[Table 2 and Figure 4 about here]

The multivariate regression analysis presented in Table 2 displays the results of the full model predicting overall levels of political activism, including the range of social and demographic controls as well as the impact of regular newspaper reading and use of the Internet. The results show that, as expected, age had a significant and strong effect upon political participation, with people becoming more active as they enter middle-age, with a slight fall in a curvilinear pattern in the over 70s. Interestingly, gender and race appear to be insignificant predictors of activism in this model, although women and men in Britain have been found to have different patterns of participation in other studies (Norris, Lovenduski and Campbell 2004). As many others have long reported, by providing civic skills and boosting a sense of internal efficacy, education is one of the

strongest influences upon activism (Verba et al. 1978, 1995). Graduates and those with higher educational qualifications are consistently the most politically engaged. Social class also plays a significant role in participation, with managers and professionals the most engaged, in part because occupational status is so closely related to educational qualifications. Even with this battery of controls, both regular newspaper readership and Internet use remain significant predictors of political activism. This relationship may obviously be reciprocal, with knowledge and engagement encouraging media habits, as well as vice versa (Norris 2000). The way in which the Internet serves as a source of general information about news, current affairs, and political events, may help provide the knowledge and confidence that are strongly associated with active engagement in public affairs. And patterns of activism that develop may well encourage greater use of the Internet as a way to find out about current affairs, government services, or events in the news. In this regard, the Internet may appear to function in a similar way to newspapers, while also providing social networks and reinforcing contacts that can help mobilize citizens in the public sphere.

[Table 3 about here]

Similar models were run with the battery of controls for all the four separate indicators of political activism. The results in Table 3 confirm that Internet users remain more active than non-users in cause-oriented and civic-oriented forms of participation, suggesting that this is not simply a product of their distinctive social profile in terms of their age, gender, race, education, and class. The difference among users and non-users remains insignificant in the more traditional campaign-oriented forms of activism. And after applying these controls, Internet users became significantly more likely to vote, not less. When the effects of Internet use are compared with those associated with regular newspaper readership, the patterns show the strongest contrast between traditional forms of campaign activism (which are significantly related to regular newspaper readership) and cause-oriented activism (which are significantly related to Internet use). The implications of these patterns for the democratic participation in political systems are considered below.

IV: Conclusions and Discussion

The rise of the Internet has generated considerable interest and concern about its possible consequences for government and democracy. The bursting of the Internet economic bubble dampened the more utopian political hopes as well, and the conventional wisdom shifted in a more skeptical direction. Yet in reality both the many hopes and fears may well prove to have been exaggerated, although this does not mean that there are no significant consequences for the political system from the development of new communication and information technologies.

The conclusion from this study is that any analysis of the impact of using the Internet needs to take account of the distinct dimensions by which people channel their activism into public affairs. The market model theorizes that some of the uses of the Internet are 'supply'-driven, notably what opportunities parties, groups and the news media offer supporters and activists via their online websites. Innovative uses, such as the role of fundraising and blogs on candidate websites in the 2004 US campaign, expand the ways that people can become involved in politics. At the same time, whether people take advantage of these opportunities is theorized to depend upon 'demand'-side factors, notably the social profile of the online population and their habitual patterns of political behavior and attitudes. This account suggests that the most popular forms of online activism are likely to reflect the preponderance of younger and well-educated populations using the Internet, in Britain and elsewhere, until such a time as the online population eventually 'normalizes' to reflect a cross-section of the general electorate.

The conclusion from the British survey evidence is that the potential impact of the Internet on democratic participation depends heavily upon the type of activism under comparison. The online population is most predisposed to engage in cause-oriented forms of activism, characteristic of petitioning, demonstrating, and contacting the media over single-issue politics,

and civic-oriented activities such as belonging to voluntary associations and community organizations. By contrast, traditional campaign-oriented forms of political activism are associated far more strongly with newspaper readership than use of the Internet. And the patterns by voting participation suggest that without any controls, Internet users are less likely to turnout than non-users, although this pattern is reversed once controls are introduced for the age, education, gender and class of the online population. Subsequent surveys will monitor how far this pattern persists or evolves with newer developments in the use of the Internet, including during the next British general election. The implications of these findings are not simply about whether use of the Internet will mobilize citizens at individual level, but also for the type of political practices which the rise of the Internet might encourage in the political system. What seems apparent is that use of the Internet by political parties will probably be unlikely to stem any erosion in traditional campaign-oriented activities, which many observers emphasize has been occurring, although at the same time the new technologies will probably benefit new social movements, transnational policy networks, and single-issue causes, which seem to be expanding in popularity in many democracies.

Table 1: Mean scores on the indicator of political activism scales by experience of Internet use, without any controls

Uses Internet	Political activism scale	Voted	Campaign-oriented activism	Cause-oriented activism	Civic-oriented activism
Non-users	2.15	.69	.48	.43	.55
All Internet users	2.65	.65	.51	.65	.83
Difference	+0.50	-.04	+.03	+.22	+.28
Sig.	.000	.004	.149	.000	.000
Eta	.117	.044	.022	.129	.129
Used the Internet...					
Under a year	2.79	.66	.49	.75	.93
1-3 years	2.94	.67	.56	.74	.98
3-5 years	3.39	.63	.66	.92	1.14
5 years+	3.74	.65	.65	1.07	1.39
Difference	+0.95	-0.01	+0.16	+0.32	0.46
Sig.	.000	.486	.009	.000	.000
Eta	.147	.039	.084	.126	.133
Total sample	2.38	.67	.50	.53	.68

Notes: The significance of the mean difference between Internet users and non-users is measured by ANOVA. See the text for details of the construction of the scales.

Source: The British Social Attitudes survey, 2003

Table 2: The impact of Internet use on the overall Political Activism scale, with controls (full model)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	P.
(Constant)	-.580	.137		.000
DEMOGRAPHIC				
Age (in years)	.032	.002	.271	.000
Sex (Male=1/Female=0)	-.008	.062	-.002	.902
Ethnic minority (1)	.000	.116	.000	.998
SOCIO-ECONOMIC				
Education (Highest qualification on 7-point scale)	.242	.019	.251	.000
Managerial	.433	.088	.097	.000
Lower white collar	-.007	.052	-.002	.895
Petit bourgeoisie	.037	.041	.014	.360
Foremen and technicians	.032	.025	.020	.199
MEDIA USE				
Regular newspaper reader (Normally reads paper at least 3 times a week)	.273	.061	.065	.000
Uses Internet (Yes=1/No=0)	.323	.074	.076	.000
Adjusted R2	.135			

Notes: The model presents the results of OLS regression analysis where the dependent variable is the overall Political Activism scale. Class is categorized by the respondent's occupation where the 'working class' functions as the contrast category in the model. The significant variables are highlighted in **bold**.

Source: The British Social Attitudes survey, 2003

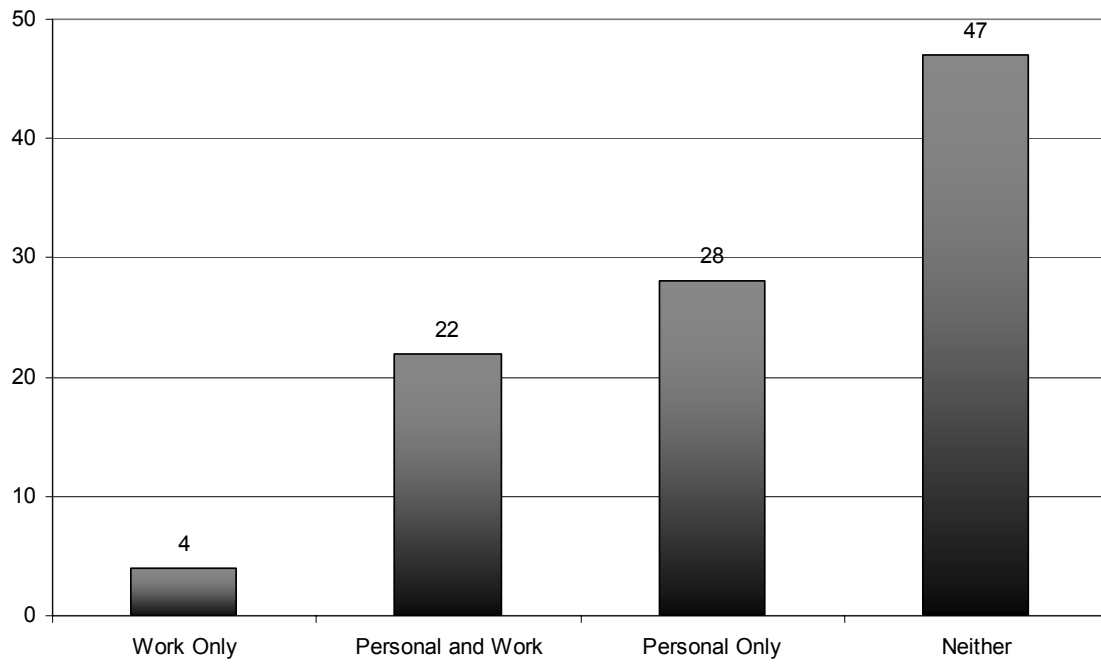
Table 3: Summary models of the impact of media use on the activism indicators, with demographic and social controls (not presented)

	Voted			Campaign-oriented activism			Cause-oriented activism			Civic-oriented activism		
	B	se	sig	B	se	sig	B	se	sig	B	se	sig
Regular newspaper reader (Normally reads paper at least 3 times a week)	.280	.020	.000	.117	.020	.000	.036	.027	.172	.067	.032	.036
Uses Internet (Yes=1/No=0)	.216	.086	.012	.043	.024	.071	.073	.033	.026	.158	.039	.000

Notes: The table presents the results of regression analysis models, including the unstandardized betas (B), the standard error (s.e.), and their significance, where the dependent variables are the indicators of the four main dimensions of political activism. The full model presented in Table 2 is used, controlling for the respondent's age, sex, race, education, and occupational class, although these coefficients are not reported here. A binary logistic model is used for voting participation and OLS linear models for the other scales. The significant variables are highlighted in **bold**.

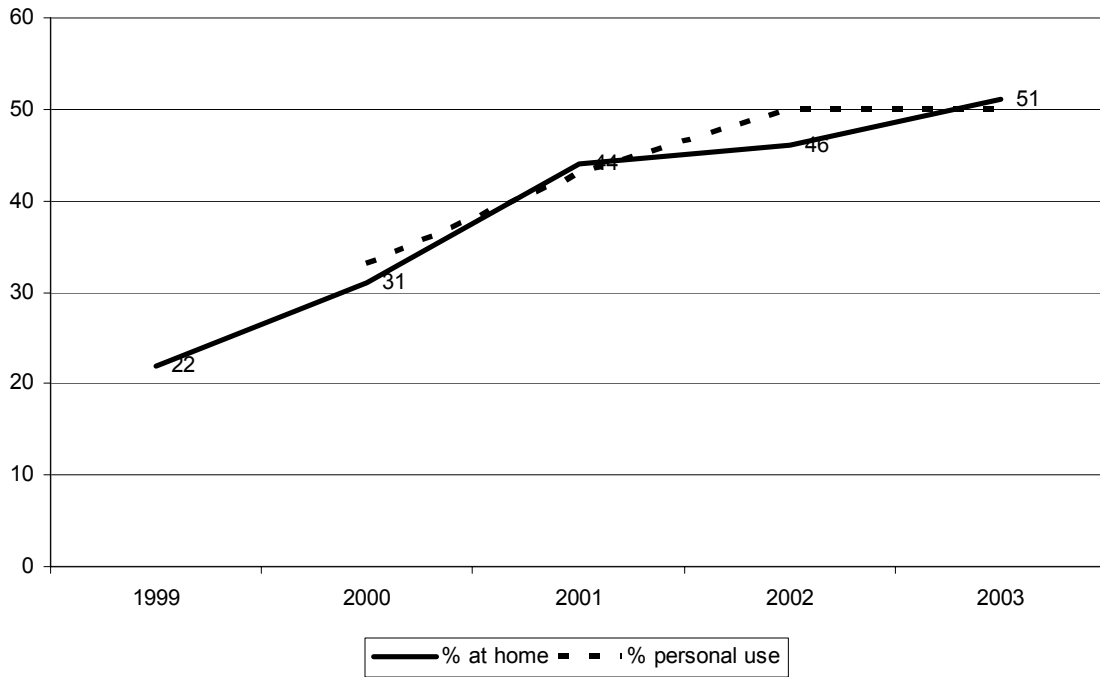
Source: The British Social Attitudes survey, 2003

Figure 1: Access to the Internet in Britain, 2003



Source: The British Social Attitudes survey, 2003

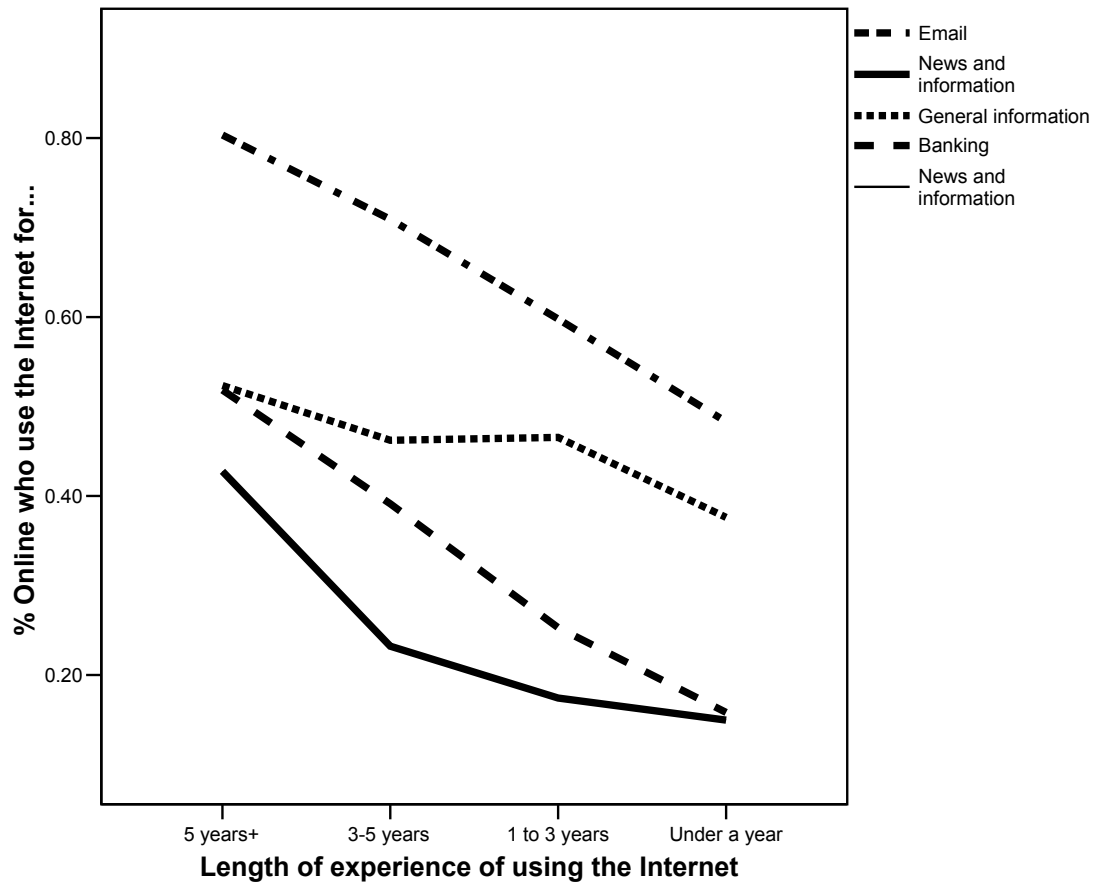
Figure 2: Growing home use of the Internet in Britain, 1999-2003



Note: "Do you yourself ever use the Internet or World Wide Web for any reason (other than your work)?"

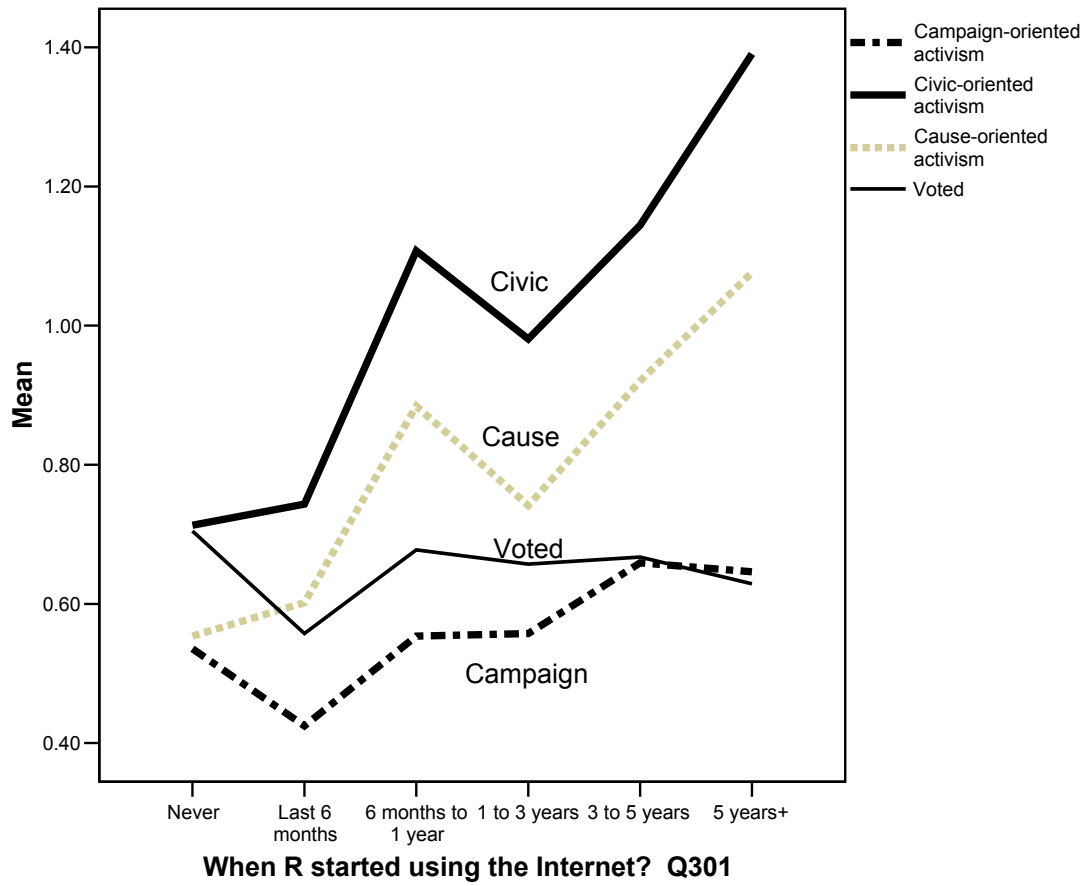
Source: The British Social Attitudes surveys, 1999-2003

Figure 3: Uses of the Internet by length of experience



Source: The British Social Attitudes survey 2003

Figure 4: Civic engagement by length of experience of using the Internet



Source: The British Social Attitudes surveys, 1999-2003

Appendix A:

Scales	Question wording
Voted	<p><i>May I just check, thinking back to the last general election - that is the one in 2001 - do you remember which party you voted for then, or perhaps you didn't vote in that election? Yes/No</i></p>
Campaign-oriented activism	<p><i>And have you ever done any of the things on this card about a government action which you thought was unjust and harmful?...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Contact my MP or MSP</i> <p><i>Are you currently a member of, or do you regularly join in the activities of, any of the organisations on this card?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Political parties or trade unions (inc student unions)</i> <p><i>Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?</i></p> <p><i>(IF 'yes'), Would you call yourself very strong (party), fairly strong, or not very strong? ('very'+'fairly').</i></p>
Cause-oriented activism	<p><i>And have you ever done any of the things on this card about a government action which you thought was unjust and harmful?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Contact a government department</i> • <i>Contact radio, TV or a newspaper</i> • <i>Sign a petition</i> • <i>Raise the issue in an organization I already belong to</i> • <i>Go on a protest or demonstration</i> • <i>Form a group of like-minded people</i>
Civic-oriented activism	<p><i>Are you currently a member of, or do you regularly join in the activities of, any of the organisations on this card?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>An environmental or conservation group</i> • <i>A pressure group or campaigning organisation</i> • <i>Parent-teachers' / school parents association / Board of Governors etc</i> • <i>Youth groups (e.g. scouts, guides, youth clubs etc)</i> • <i>Education, arts, drama, reading or music group / evening class</i> • <i>Religious group or church organisation</i> • <i>A sports or recreation club</i> • <i>Tenants' / Residents' group / Neighbourhood watch</i> • <i>Social club / working men's club</i> • <i>Women's group / Women's Institute</i> • <i>Group for older people (e.g. lunch clubs)</i> • <i>Local groups which raise money for charity (e.g. The Rotary Club)</i> • <i>Other local community or voluntary group</i> • <i>Other national or international group</i>

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Endnotes:

¹ See <http://weblogs.about.com/cs/2004uscampaign/a/2004campaign.htm>

² See www.pewinternet.org

³ Since the dimensions are theoretically defined and constructed, based on understanding the role of different forms of participation in representative democracy, the study did not use factor analysis to generate the classification or measurement.

⁴ It should be noted that the BSA survey monitored 'party and trade union' membership, but the latter was also measured separately, so in the recoded measure, the residual group remains only the party members.