

If You Build a Political Web Site, Will They Come?

The Internet and Political Activism in Britain

Pippa Norris, Harvard University, USA

John Curtice, Strathclyde University, UK

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the capacity of the Internet for strengthening political activism. The first part summarizes debates about these issues in the previous literature. This study starts from the premise that political activism is a multidimensional phenomenon and that we need to understand how different channels of participation relate to the social and political characteristics of the online population. We predict that certain dimensions of activism will probably be strengthened by the rise of the knowledge society, particularly cause-oriented forms of political participation, reflecting the prior social and political characteristics of the online population. By contrast, we expect the Internet to have far less impact upon conventional channels of political participation, exemplified by election campaigns. The second part summarizes the sources of data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the British Social Attitudes Survey from 2003. The third part examines the evidence for the relationship between use of the Internet and patterns of civic engagement in the British context. The conclusion summarizes the results and considers their broader implications.

Keywords: Please provide

INTRODUCTION

The rise of knowledge societies represents one of the most profound transformations that have occurred in recent decades. This phenomenon, characterized by the widespread diffusion of informa-

tion and communication technologies (ICTs) across society, promises to have major consequences by expanding access to education and training, broadening channels of expression and social networks, as well as revolutionizing the na-

ture of work and the economy. The primary impact of this development has been evident in affluent nations 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 countries with relatively high levels of ICTs, such as Malaysia and Brazil (U.N., 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 civic engagement.

To consider these issues, the first part summarizes debates about the impact of the Internet on civic engagement. This study assumes that political activism is a multidimensional phenomenon. The impact of the Internet on each of these dimensions, in turn, is assumed to be heavily dependent upon the social and political characteristics of Internet users. Given this framework, the study predicts that the primary impact of using the Internet will be upon facilitating cause-oriented forms of political activism, thereby strengthening social movements, voluntary associations, and interest groups, more than upon conventional channels of political participation, exemplified by election campaigns. To test these propositions in the British context, the second part summarizes the sources of data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2003. The third part examines the evidence for the relationship between use of the Internet and indicators of civic engagement. The conclusion in the final part

summarizes the empirical results and considers their broader implications.

THEORIES OF THE IMPACT OF KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES ON DEMOCRACY

Multiple theories exist about how the growth of knowledge societies could potentially influence political participation and civic engagement in contemporary democracies. Three main perspectives can be identified in the previous 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 (Barber, 1998; Budge, 1996, Rash, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Schwartz, 1996). This view was popular as the Internet initially rapidly expanded in the United States during the mid-1990s, and this perspective 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 & Guilia, 1999). Empirical backing for this view has come from analysis of the Pew Internet and Ameri-

can Life Project, which suggests that Internet users have wider social networks than non-users (Ranney, 2000; Robinson et al., 2000; Pew 2001; Uslaner 2004), a result replicated in Britain (Gardner & Oswald, 2001).

The Knowledge Elite and Social Inequalities

Yet these claims remain highly controversial. Cyber-pessimists 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 growth of ICTs will disproportionately benefit the most affluent sectors in the developed world (Golding, 1996; Hayward, 1995; Murdock & Golding, 1989; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003). Observers suggests that traditional interest groups, major parties, 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 & Hughes, 1998; McChesney 1999; Selnow, 1998; Toulouse & Luke, 1998). If political resources on the Internet reflect the voice and influence of the more affluent sectors and dominant groups, this could reinforce existing political disparities and class biases commonly found in political activism within democratic societies.

Politics as Usual

An alternative skeptical perspective suggests that 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 & Resnick, 2000). This view stresses the embedded status quo and the difficulties of achieving radical change to political systems through technological mechanisms. During the 2000 American election campaign, for example, commentators suggest that 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 (Foot & Schneider, 2002; Media Metrix, 2000). Elsewhere, content analysis of political party Web sites 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 off-line, 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, & Ward, 2003)

Studies of the contents of government department Web sites 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 and transparency, but it does not necessarily function so effectively as a medium expanding opportunities for citizen consultation, policy discussion, or other public inputs into the policymaking process (Allen, Juillet, Paquet, & Roy, 2001; Chadwick & May, 2003; Fountain, 2001; Haque, 2002; Stowers, 1999; Thomas & Streib, 2003).

The Multidimensional Nature of Political Activism

In contrast to these perspectives, this study follows the convention established by Verba and his colleagues (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady 1995) in assuming that political activism is multidimensional with many distinct forms of involvement, each associated with differing costs and benefits. The impact of the Internet can be expected to differ in each of these, mainly due to the prior social and political characteristics of the online population. Four main categories can be distinguished, each with different costs and benefits: voting, campaign-oriented activism, cause-oriented activism, and civic-oriented activism.

Voting in regular elections is one of the most ubiquitous forms of citizen-oriented participation, requiring some initia-

tive 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 & McNeal, 2003; Norris, 2004).

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 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” (Verba et al., 1978, p. 46). 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 mobiliz-

ing 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 & van 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 participating in discussion groups hosted on party or candidate Web sites (Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003; Hague & Loader, 1999; Norris, 2001). At the same time, the online population is usually younger than average, while party members and activists are typically drawn from middle-aged and older sectors of society. The social characteristics of online users mean that they are unlikely to be drawn toward party Web sites and thus traditional forms of campaign activism.

Cause-oriented activities are focused primarily upon influencing specific issues and policies. These acts are exemplified by whether respondents have actual experience in 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 that 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. The proliferation of cause-oriented Web sites, combined with the typical age and educational profile of the online population, makes this a particularly rich area of activism that can be expected to be reinforced through the Internet.

Lastly **civic-oriented** activities, by contrast, involve membership and work-

ing 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 toward a dense, rich, and vibrant social infrastructure (Putnam, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2002; Pharr & 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 re-

garded 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 & 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, & Fox 2001).

Therefore the argument developed in this study rejects the view that everything will change as the Internet facilitates radical forms of direct democracy that come to replace the traditional channels of representative governance (as optimists originally hoped). Nor do we accept that the digital divide will inevitably reinforce existing socio-economic and demographic disparities in political activism (as pessimists predicted). The alternative view that nothing will change as the digital world merely replicates “politics as usual” (as the skeptics suggest) also seems implausible. Instead the argument developed here suggests that we need to understand the multidimensional nature of political activism and how this interacts with the characteristics of Internet users. We predict that certain dimensions of activism will prob-

ably be strengthened by the rise of the knowledge society, particularly cause-oriented forms of political participation, reflecting the prior social and political characteristics of the online population.

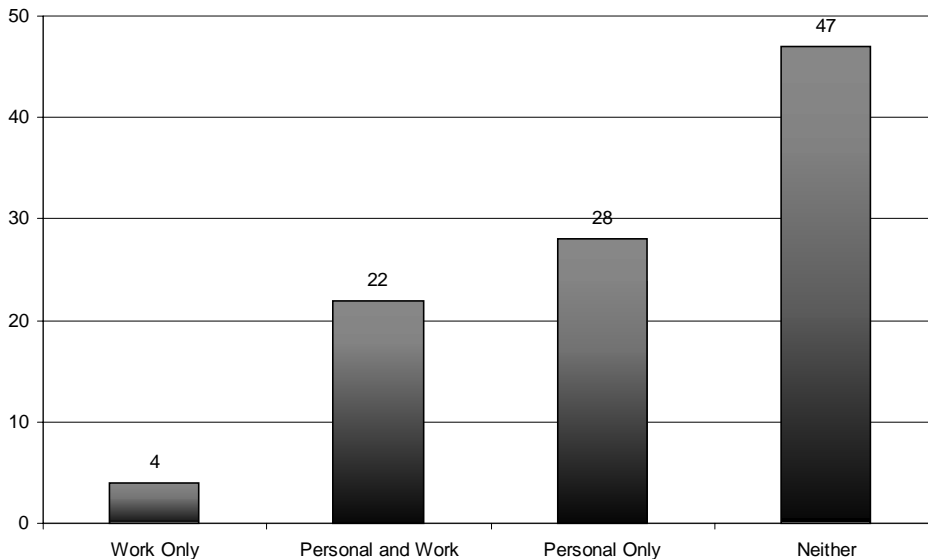
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, EVIDENCE, AND SURVEY DATA

Interpretations of the results of the existing empirical studies about the role of ICTs on civic engagement remain divided in part because the outcome may be conditional upon the characteristics of early Internet adopters, the location of individuals within society, and the particular types of society under comparison. It remains unclear how far the patterns uncovered in much of the existing U.S. research on these issues are conditioned by the particular characteristics of American politics and society, or how far the findings hold more generally elsewhere. One way to explore this issue is to consider the evidence for the uses and functions of the Internet in Britain. Both Britain and America are affluent post-industrial service economies, sharing strong cultural links. Yet significant contrasts are also evident, including in general levels of electoral turnout, party activism, and associational membership (Norris 2003).

To explore the impact of Internet use upon political activism in the British context, this paper draws upon the results of a multi-wave research project based on a special battery of items, contained in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) 2003. The BSA is a representative national survey that has been conducted every year since 1983. Each survey is conducted using

more than 3,000 interviews with a representative random sample of people in Britain. The 2003 survey monitored use of the Internet, social capital, and civic engagement. The core items are being repeated in two subsequent waves of the BSA surveys, allowing the evolution of the Internet to be monitored over time.

The 2003 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% less than the comparable figure in America during the equivalent period, as monitored by the Pew Internet & American Life Project¹. 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. The 2005 BSA suggests that use

Figure 1. Access to the Internet in Britain, 2003

Source: *The British Social Attitudes Survey, 2003*

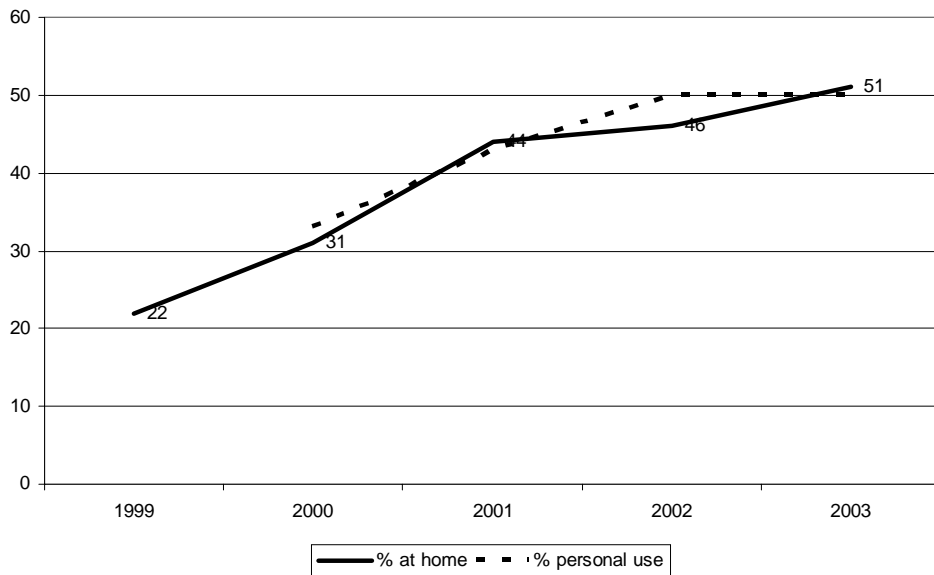
has now spread slightly further, to 56% of respondents.

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 its 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 (Norris, 2001; Wilhelm, 1999). This means that any multivariate analysis of the impact of Internet use needs to control for the prior social and demographic characteristics of users, including their age, sex, race, education, and social class.

Nevertheless, with only cross-sectional survey data it remains difficult to iso-

late and disentangle the impact of access to the Internet from the social background of users. 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 online, as well as to compare the group who only recently started to use the Internet against 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 that encourage them to become more active in community affairs. Figure 3 illustrates some

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)?"

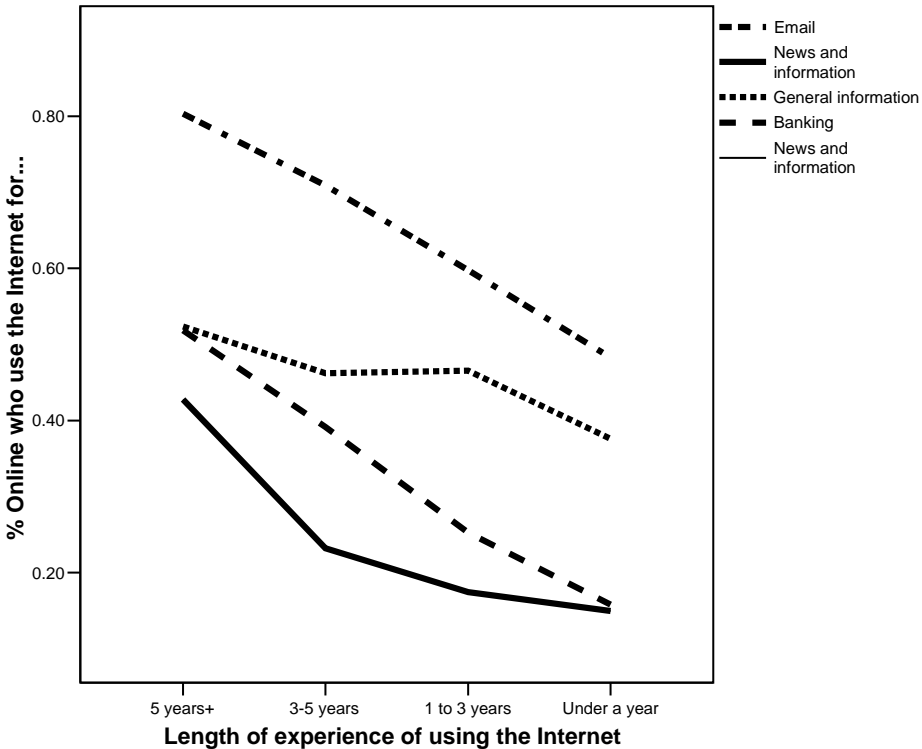
Source: The British Social Attitudes surveys, 1999-2003

of these common contrasts, for example, how the most experienced users were significantly more likely to use the Internet for email, banking, and news. At the same time caution is needed when drawing inferences based on length of Internet experience, because over time the online population has gradually "normalized" in its characteristics, becoming more representative of the general public. As a result, it remains unclear whether any contrasts between the more and less experienced user groups can be attributed to Internet exposure per se, or to the "normalization" of the online population.

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, p. 113). Similar patterns are commonly found elsewhere, with regular newspaper readers more informed and engaged than average (Norris 2000). The

Figure 3. Uses of the Internet by length of experience



Source: The British Social Attitudes Survey, 2003

models in this study therefore compare the relationship between Internet use and civic engagement with that between regular newspaper readership and civic engagement. Controlling for newspaper readership also provides a way to monitor prior political predispositions.

The design of the items measuring civic engagement are based upon the assumption that involvement 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 the four main

dimensions of activism already discussed, namely: voting, campaign-oriented, cause-oriented, and civic-oriented. These are summarized into a Political Activism Index combining all dimensions². The basic items used to develop the measures are listed in Appendix A.

Voting participation is measured in the BSA 2003 by whether respondents reported that they recalled voting in the 2001 British general election.

Experience of *campaign-oriented* activism is gauged in this study by a three-item scale including whether people are members of a party³, whether they ex-

press 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 that 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 will be monitored in subsequent BSA surveys, but the measures used here can be regarded as at least general, if far from perfect, proxies for campaign activism that are available in the 2003 survey.

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, experience of civic activism is gauged here by a 14-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. 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 & 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 toward participation, and thereby help explain this phenomenon, as prior preconditions, but they are not, in themselves, channels that citizens can use for expressing political concerns or mobilizing group interests.

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

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	+0.03	+.22	+.28
Sig.	.000	.004	.149	.000	.000
Eta	.117	.044	.022	.129	.129
SD Non-users	1.83	.46	.48	.74	.55
SD all Internet users	2.36	.48	.51	1.01	1.21
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

in Britain continues to be skewed toward 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 presents the mean score on these indicators for the group of all Internet users compared with all non-users, the standard deviation, 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 indica-

tors of cause-oriented and civic-oriented participation, as well as in the total activism scale. This pattern suggests that the forms of political involvement that 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 their levels of campaign activism.

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.

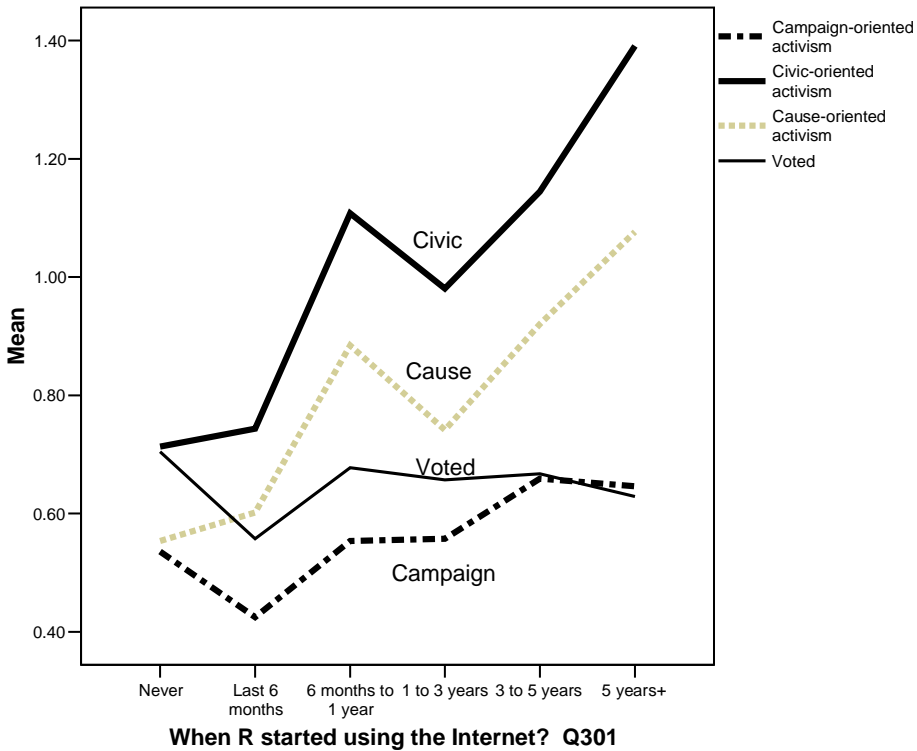
Source: The British Social Attitudes Survey, 2003

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 is due to the effects of length of exposure to the Internet per se or whether this re-

flected the gradual changes in the social composition and political attitudes of the Internet population.

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

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



Source: The British Social Attitudes surveys, 1999-2003

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, & Campbell 2004). As numerous studies have 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

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

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.

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 contrary to expectations, after applying these controls, Internet users became significantly more likely to vote, not less. It may be that the ubiquity and particular characteristics of this activity, with the lowest demands of time and energy, mean that voting participation is associated with both media. 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 political participation in democracy are considered next.

CONCLUSION 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 political consequences flowing 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 into account the distinct dimensions by which people channel their activism into public affairs. We need to understand how the types of Internet activism interact with the social profile of the online population. 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 ac-

tivism 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 more strongly with newspaper readership. 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 Internet. 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 that the rise of the Internet might encourage in the political system. What seems apparent is that use of the Internet by political parties seems unlikely to stem any erosion in traditional campaign-oriented activities. At the same time, the new technologies will probably prove to be of greatest benefit to engaging supporters in social movements, transnational policy networks, and single-issue causes, encouraging their expansion in many democracies.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See www.pewinternet.org.
- ² 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.
- ³ 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.

APPENDIX A

Scales	Question wording
Voted	<p>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</p>
Campaign-oriented activism	<p>And have you ever done any of the things on this card about a government action which you thought was unjust and harmful? ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact my MP or MSP <p>Are you currently a member of, or do you regularly join in the activities of, any of the organizations on this card?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political parties or trade unions (inc student unions) <p>Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others? (IF 'yes'), Would you call yourself very strong (party), fairly strong, or not very strong? ('very'+fairly').</p>
Cause-oriented activism	<p>And have you ever done any of the things on this card about a government action which you thought was unjust and harmful?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact a government department • Contact radio, TV, or a newspaper • Sign a petition • Raise the issue in an organization I already belong to • Go on a protest or demonstration • Form a group of like-minded people
Civic-oriented activism	<p>Are you currently a member of, or do you regularly join in the activities of, any of the organizations on this card?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An environmental or conservation group • A pressure group or campaigning organization • Parent-teachers/school parents association/Board of Governors, etc. • Youth groups (e.g., scouts, guides, youth clubs, etc.) • Education, arts, drama, reading, or music group / evening class • Religious group or church organization • A sports or recreation club • Tenants'/residents' group/neighborhood watch • Social club/working men's club • Women's group/Women's Institute • Group for older people (e.g., lunch clubs) • Local groups which raise money for charity (e.g., The Rotary Club) • Other local community or voluntary group • Other national or international group

Pippa Norris is the McGuire lecturer in comparative politics at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Her work compares political communications, elections and public opinion, and gender politics. Recent books for Cambridge University Press include Sacred and Secular (2004), Electoral Engineering (2004), and Radical Right (2005).

John Curtice is professor of government and director of the Social Statistics Laboratory at the University of Strathclyde, and a research consultant to the National Centre for Social Research. He has written extensively about trends in political participation in Britain in recent years.