

The Net Effect on Popular Participation in Government

Max Vilimpoc
P.O. Box 3458
Columbus, OH 43210
(614) 294-3501

vilimpoc.2@osu.edu
The Ohio State University

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Although widely perceived as a new, enhanced means by which political information may be disseminated to the masses, the Internet will likely become simply another conduit for large amounts of unfiltered political information to reach the general populace. Among most citizens, it will not aid in the clarification of complex legislature nor foster the growth of grassroots activism greater than to the extent that word of mouth is presently capable. The presence of a new medium will have relatively minor influence on the core determinants of the democratic process.

Despite the fact that its growing ubiquity is providing more and more citizens the ability to participate in government, its popularity does not imply that they will choose to do so¹. Instead, the Internet will serve to augment the communications abilities of large and small political organizations but it will not in itself become a primary source of influence upon much of the general populace. In fact, the Internet may serve only to foment the continuing decline in direct participation in government. An examination of the determinants of political participation (self-motivation, media saturation, demographics) by this essay will expose the reasoning behind this thought.

While it is believed that the erosion of direct citizen participation in governance is the effect of insufficient media availability, it is actually the result of a media *saturation*² which *increases* the difficulty faced in distinguishing and filtering those issues which are truly relevant

¹ *Internet not expected to expand voter participation*; Associated Press; May 22, 2000

² *Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience, Section I: The Changing Media Landscape*; The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press; June 11, 2000

to an individual participant. When all of the channels on a television simultaneously transmit essentially the same message, from different political groups, how are citizens able to differentiate between them³? The addition of a new delivery method simply adds fuel to the confusing mass of media that citizens are confronted with.

Civic-activism and political astuteness have not increased following the invention and large-scale distribution of the television and radio, the two most widely accessible media outlets. As a matter of record, the percentage voter participation in both Presidential and off-year elections has declined steadily over the past century⁴. If the two prior technologies were unable to provide sufficient impetus to increase popular participation in government, can we truly expect the increasing availability of the Internet to conquer this deficit?

It is apparent that the ready availability of information does not suggest that people will diligently seek it out. Before the widespread availability of Internet access, informational resources regarding candidates for office and local and state issues were readily available in central locations, such as libraries. Politically active and civic-minded individuals utilized these resources to educate themselves about the plethora of governmental options. Non-active citizens tended to remain ignorant to the issues, regardless of accessibility. Correspondingly, the Internet today is no more likely to induce citizens in the latter category to educate themselves politically. Furthermore, the pervasive *decentralization* of knowledge on the Internet makes it more difficult to effectively gather decisive and impartial information about candidates or issues. This factor certainly would have a negative effect on the desire of an individual to gain political competency.

³ *GOP group airing pro-Nader ads*; Associated Press; October 27, 2000

⁴ *1999 Statistical Abstract of the United States, Section 8. Elections*; U.S. Census Bureau

Perhaps one of the strongest reasons for the continual success of the off-line media (newspapers, television, radio, billboards, etc.) in informing citizens about current political issues is *simplicity*. Simplicity is the reason that the League of Women Voters' information packets and advertisements are recognized as important staples of the democratic process. By presenting essential facts and figures, endorsements and platform statements, in an objective way, the packets distill entire political campaigns into manageable and comprehensible knowledge for consumption by the general populace. In a manner of thinking, the *desaturation* and *centralization* of esoteric political knowledge more effectively aids the democratic process than providing boundless knowledge on-line in highly detailed but unmanageable formats.

Another aspect that will likely feed a growing feeling of disenfranchisement among members of the public is the idea that the Internet moves citizens further from the process of government, not closer to active involvement⁵. Consider the familiar case of the town-hall debate. Held in a public place, announced publicly in local newspapers, on the radio, and on local television stations, open debate is perhaps the oldest institution of democracy. Imagine now the problems inherent in abstracting debate from its physical setting. Suppose that an interactive chat session replaces a familiar school building or city hall as the "location" for the debate. Immediately, policies established in this virtual meeting space do not bind a citizen to any sense of place, let alone to their town. The policies under discussion might concern the citizen's town, or Anytown, U.S.A.. Citizens may feel that the laws and legislation voted into effect online have no binding authority in the real world, or upon real people.

⁵ *Are We Ready for Internet Voting?: Electro-Disenfranchisement*, The Voting Integrity Project; August 12, 1999
http://www.voting-integrity.org/projects/votingtechnology/internetvoting/ivp_11_electro.shtml

Demographically, it is important to note that the prevalence of Internet use in America is within relatively affluent urban and suburban homes. According to a Department of Commerce report⁶ released July 9, 1999,

“Despite increasing connectivity for all groups, in some areas the digital divide still exists and, in a number of cases, is growing. Some groups (such as certain minority or low-income households in rural America) still have PC and Internet penetration rates in the single digits. By contrast, other groups (such as higher-income, highly educated, or dual-parent households) have rising connectivity rates. One promising sign of change is that the gap between races for PC ownership has narrowed significantly at the highest income level (above \$75,000).”

This statement indicates that while Internet utilization is increasing, online democracy may not fairly and equally represent the views of a population. An example of such biases, introduced by limited sampling models, was already encountered once in election history. In 1936, the *Literary Digest* magazine conducted a survey of subscribers and citizens, whose names were drawn from telephone directories and automobile registration records⁷, concerning their choice in the coming Presidential election between Franklin Roosevelt and Alf Landon. An overwhelming number of those polled indicated their support of Landon, the Republican candidate. When the results from the official election were returned with the landslide victory belonging to Roosevelt, the Democratic candidate, the survey methods were closely scrutinized. In light of the fact that

⁶ *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*; U.S Department of Commerce; July 9, 1999; pp. xv, 5

⁷ *Your Choice. Your Voice. Lesson 5: The Polls, A Backgrounder*; Turner Learning Inc.; 2000
http://turnerlearning.com/cnn/election/15_backgrounder.html

the election occurred during the height of the Depression years, the ownership of telephones and automobiles was mostly associated with the affluent stratum of society, which traditionally tended to vote Republican. Due to this oversight, the *Literary Digest* had inadvertently polled a biased population and weren't able to produce an accurate measurement of genuine public opinion.

Thankfully, the poll results were generated via a non-binding survey. However, the notion that an internet-based voting schema could become binding is disturbing because it implies that a non-representative cross-section of potential voters might be sampled and taken to be the official will of the people. Faced with this possibility, it is possible that the ranks of non-Internet connected citizens would begin to face estrangement from the political system by failing to meet the rudimentary requirements of using a computer. This, in a sense, is similar to the poll taxes or landholding requirements, which hampered early democracy.

Another worrisome trend is the continuing privatization and consolidation between global *media* conglomerates and the technically oriented *medium* corporations providing the physical hardware upon which the Internet operates. Although the Internet as a *medium* cannot be considered to be under the control of any singular entity, the combined effort of these far-reaching collectives *can* affect the *media* published on the Internet. Because they exercise editorial control over what materials are published and how widely information is disseminated, opinions published to websites controlled by such corporations may not be representative of public opinion-at-large.

The merger between *media* and *medium* corporations would allow, for the first time, a dominance of both the content and the delivery/retrieval systems of information. Thus, the onus is placed on a corporation to prove that it is capable of freely and fairly permitting equal access

to its resources and protecting the freedom of speech and expression of its users. An example of unfair exploitation is the possibility that, in the future, an Internet user might only be able to visit Time magazine's online website if they are subscribers of Time-Warner's high-speed cable Internet service.

A tangible example of undemocratic behavior was demonstrated in May 2000, when Time Warner engaged Disney in a pricing dispute over the cost of carrying the Disney Channel and other affiliated media over its cable system in Southern California. In the interim before settlement of the issue, Time Warner unilaterally removed all of Disney's programming from their cable service^{8,9}.

While it is impossible to state with certainty that the effects of the Internet on democracy will be negligible, it is also impossible to predict its efficacy in modifying the determinants of democratic participation. Following in the footsteps of television and radio, the Internet may simply prove capable of providing more information to citizens and incapable of instilling greater civic responsibility in them.

⁸ *What scares rivals about the AOL and Time Warner merger*; U.S. News & World Report; October 2, 2000
<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/001002/aol.htm>

⁹ *Disney Wants AOL - Time Warner Split*; about.com Reference; July 21, 2000
<http://aol.about.com/internet/aol/library/weekly/aa072100a.htm>