# Being a Citizen Online
## New Opportunities and Dead Ends

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This study compares the impact of various types of traditional and Web-based forms of communication on political efficacy, knowledge, and participation. Findings suggest that the role of the Internet in promoting citizenship is limited. In fact, respondents who used the Web frequently for entertainment purposes were less likely to feel efficacious about their potential role in the democratic process and also knew less about facts relevant to current events. Regardless of the frequency with which people used the Internet for various informational or entertainment purposes, these analyses suggest that traditional mass media maintain a key role in promoting democratic citizenship.

Can the Internet reverse faltering levels of American civic engagement and foster greater levels of political participation? History suggests that claims regarding the contributions of new communication technologies to the maintenance and vitality of the public sphere are often little more than intellectual chewing gum: they taste great at first but inevitably lack substance. When radio was first introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was conceived of as a scientific marvel, a wireless communication device that could connect citizens in interactive conversations from across the globe. Three decades later, just as radio sets had begun to be adopted across American households, the rapid commercialization of the medium had turned the device into one-way communication of news and entertainment, prompting some to predict a downturn in print media popularity. Instead of replacing print news, however, radio broadcasts motivated listeners to turn to newspapers for more detailed information (Defleur and Dennis 2001).

When the telephone was invented, it was heralded as a catalyst for expanding social networks beyond the limitations of neighborhood connections, yet research indicates the telephone's main impact, beyond certain emotional and psychological gratifications (O'Keefe and Sulanowski 1995), has been that

people visit people whom they call and call the people whom they visit (Park et al. 1981; Wellman and Tindall 1993), with an overall likely net loss in the amount of face-to-face interactions. The telephone has reinforced, not replaced, existing patterns of social networks (Putnam 2000).

With the diffusion of television across American households, many hoped television news might be a means for informing the mass public, especially those individuals from lower socioeconomic levels who did not engage in regular newspaper use. However, subsequent research has indicated that the knowledge individuals can gain from a newscast is limited and that television news viewing does little to solve the "knowledge gap" between elites and nonelites (Tichenor et al. 1970; Chaffee and Kanihan 1997), even increasing disparities in knowledge and political participation between the educated and the noneducated (Eveland and Scheufele 2000).

Like other, previous communication technologies, the Internet has been the topic of a wide array of claims and prognostications regarding its ability to reinvigorate American civic culture. On one side of the debate, a chorus of "mobilization theorists" contend that the Internet can lead to new forms of civic engagement and to direct democracy, with a vast potential to reach young, isolated, and minority citizens; reduce communication or transaction costs; provide direct links to policymakers; reduce barriers to political participation by leveling financial hurdles; and expanding opportunities for political deliberation and debate (Norris 2001). "Reinforcement theorists" stake the opposing position, predicting that the Internet will strengthen, not reform, existing patterns of political communication, reinforce gaps between the resource rich and the resource poor, and only provide novel sources of information for the already interested (Norris 2001).

Despite numerous and strong claims regarding the impact of the Internet on political participation and civic culture, there exists a noticeable absence of empirical inquiry into the topic. In this study, we therefore provide an empirical test of the links between various traditional and Web-based forms of communication and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation. Specifically, we are trying to identify effects of the Internet on democratic citizenship above and beyond existing channels of information and mobilization.

## Conceptualizing Political Participation

Previous attempts to break the construct of political participation apart into reliable indices that display acceptable discriminant validity have been at best only moderately successful (Scheufele and Ostman 1999). Recent research therefore has relied on multidimensional conceptualizations of participation. In the seminal works on political participation, Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba et al. (1995) have conceptualized political participation into four dimensions, including (1) the frequency of voting in local and national elections; (2)

campaign activities, including persuading others, attending meetings, or contributing money; (3) citizen-initiated contacts to local, state, and national officials; and (4) cooperative activities, that is, involving group or organizational activities. Recently, McLeod et al. (1999) have introduced an additional dimension of participatory behavior, which they have labeled "nontraditional forms of participation." These activities refer to participation in public forums organized by civic journalism movements or community groups. The measure for these activities is a combined index of willingness to participate or speak out at public forums, both with and without pressure from people who hold different opinions.

The validity of these multidimensional constructs of participation is supported by their relationship to antecedent demographic variables and intermediary variables measuring communication patterns and levels of psychological engagement. McLeod et al. (1999), for example, found traditional forms of participation related to demographic variables, community integration, newspaper hard news use, feelings of political efficacy, and political knowledge. Nontraditional forms of participation were not predicted by feelings of efficacy or political knowledge but rather by orientations toward city as community versus the neighborhood and frequency of interpersonal discussion of politics.

### Reasons for a Decline in Participation

Voter turnout has fallen over the past four decades, with less than a majority of Americans voting in recent elections (Brody 1978; Cassell and Luskin 1988; Miller and Shanks 1996). More intensive forms of political participation, including campaign efforts, citizen-initiated political contacts, and group involvement, have experienced a similar linear decline over the past four decades (Verba et al. 1995; Putnam 2000; Scheufele and Ostman 1999). Those Americans who do undertake more intensive forms of participation in politics are generally not representative of the public as a whole (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba et al. 1995) and are characterized by higher levels of socioeconomic status (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Conway 1991; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Beyond low levels of political activism, recent research has documented vast political ignorance, a general lack of public affairs awareness among the general public (Bartels 1996; Converse 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1994; Althaus 1999), and declining feelings of personal efficacy in public affairs (Brody 1978; Miller and Shanks 1996). To the extent that mass media might serve as an important source of political knowledge and political mobilization (Tichenor et al. 1970; Eveland and Scheufele 2000), recent decades have seen a decline in interest in public affairs reporting, and in newspaper readership in America (Schönbach et al. 1999).

Scheufele and Ostman (1999) categorize explanations for the decline in political participation as ranging across several levels of analysis, including institutional changes (Piven and Coward 1988; Doppelt and Shearer 1999), historical

and contextual effects (Avey 1989; Cultice 1992; Doppelt and Shearer 1999), demographic predictors (Burns and Peltason 1966; Lane 1969; Verba and Nie 1972; Milbrath and Goel 1977, Verba et al. 1995; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996), and social and psychological influences (Scheufele and Ostman 1999).

In this article, we focus on Scheufele and Ostman's (1999) fifth category of explanation, communication effects. Putnam (2000) implicates the rapid advance of telecommunications, specifically America's intimate relationship with television, as increasingly detrimental to participation by (1) providing a wide diversity of content choices that cater to the narrow tastes of almost any individual at the time of a person's choosing and (2) consumption of media products in isolation from others that privatize leisure time and displace time spent participating outside of the home (Putnam 1995, 1996).

Besides this "time displacement" function of television, others have concluded that changes in media content have also hurt participation. McQuail (1998) argues that recent trends in the media toward heightened commercialization, depoliticization, and entertainment have undermined the media's traditional role of informing and involving citizens in civic and political issues. In a recent preliminary study, Patterson (2001) shows empirical support for these shifts in media content, calling attention to a dramatic growth in "soft news," or news unrelated to public affairs or policy, that is typically more sensational, more personality- or celebrity-oriented, less time-bound (meaning that the traditional journalistic norm of "timeliness" does not apply), and more incident-based than hard news. The media have also been accused of portraying government and politics in an increasingly negative fashion, influencing citizens' willingness to engage in various political activities (O'Keefe and Mendelsohn 1978; Patterson 1993) and activating political cynicism and distrust (Capella and Jamieson 1996; Moy and Pfau 2000). Others have described a failure on the part of the media to provide "mobilizing" content (Schudson 1995).

Despite these claims regarding the media's negative impact, previous empirical research has consistently shown positive links between various types of hard news media use and political participation. These links have usually been strongest for newspaper hard news use (Bybee et al. 1981; McLeod and McDonald 1985; Viswanath et al. 1990). Given the differences in information presentation and in the impact on people's information processing, television news use has been found as a weaker predictor of political participation than newspaper use (McLeod et al. 1999; Smith 1986; Wattenberg 1984). Overall, however, public affairs content both in newspapers and on television were found to increase political participation (McLeod et al. 1996; Chaffee and Kanihan 1997). In addition to mass media, interpersonal discussion or talk on political issues also facilitates various forms of political participation (McLeod et al. 1999; Scheufele 2000; Verba et al. 1995; Kim et al. 1999).

Besides the direct effects of various types of communication on participation, a potential mediation of these communication effects through other factors is of special interest to this study. Indirect impacts of communication on participation in the literature have been found working through two pathways: the cognitive and motivational routes. In other words, political learning and motivation for participation are enhanced through various types of communication, which in turn increases the level of political participation.

The relationships between communication and political learning have been documented across various types of media, in which newspaper use played a consistently positive role (Patterson and McClure 1976; Robinson and Levy 1986, 1998). Increased political knowledge in turn was related to more active participation in various political activities (Inglehart 1979; Klingemann 1979; Bennett 1986; Neuman 1986). The effective role of newspaper use in political learning is also highly relevant to its effect on political efficacy. As Iyengar (1991) argued, newspaper's "thematic" presentation of news is more likely to encourage people to reason with issues or about the role of government and, as a result, to increase political efficacy.

The media-participation relationship, however, is often mediated through people's feelings of political efficacy. Efficacy itself is positively related to political participation (Gans 1967; Pomper and Sernekos 1991). More important, however, it mediates the impact of various types of media use on political participation. McLeod et al. (1999), for example, found an indirect link from higher levels of newspaper hard news use through knowledge and then through political efficacy to be the strongest predictor of institutionalized participation.

### The Internet and Democracy

Information-rich and communication-intensive, the Internet provides essentially unlimited information on a large number of issues that can be obtained with relatively limited effort (Bimber 2001). Individuals can track in much greater depth political issues and can personalize their own news consumption, potentially cutting down on the costs of keeping up with political events (Althaus and Tewksbury 1999).

Yet the availability of information does not necessarily lead to use of information. Human beings are cognitive misers or at least satisficers; that is, they seek out as little information as possible to make any given decision (Downs 1957; Popkin 1991). The Internet makes it easier to selectively use certain types of information, but the question remains if it also increases overall levels of information seeking. For "cyber-skeptics," the Internet is like the magazine market, where some individuals are likely to subscribe to the *Economist* while others may subscribe to *Playboy* (Norris 2001). According to these skeptics, the citizens that choose to take advantage of Internet information sources will be determined by

personal resources including time, money, and technology skills as well by motivation, including interest, confidence, and feelings of efficacy (Davis 1999; Norris 2001).

Early indications from recent national survey data provide support for this more skeptical view of the Internet's effects (Pew 2000). In a survey conducted in the spring of 2000, the percentage of Americans that now go online had risen from 21 in 1996 to 54 in 2000, and the proportion using online news had increased from 13 percent in 1998 to 23 percent in 2000. There were, however, disparities in online news use across demographics. Men are more likely than women (57 to 43 percent) to go online for news, as are the college educated (40 percent) and individuals earning $75,000 or more (41 percent) in comparison to individuals with just some college (29 percent) or individuals in the next income category ranging from $50,000 to $74,999 (33 percent). In an earlier Pew poll taken in 1998, among those who used the Internet for news, when asked which specific types of news content they read online, political news (39 percent) and local news (37 percent) ranked last, trailing weather news (66 percent), science/health news (63 percent), technology news (59 percent), business news (53 percent), world news (45 percent), entertainment news (44 percent), and sports (42 percent).

Beyond the fact that Internet use may favor the already resource-advantaged and may be geared toward nonpolitical news uses, the ability to gain political knowledge from Internet use is also likely to have limitations. In a study of Internet use in relation to knowledge acquisition about science, Eveland and Dunwoody (2000) suggest that learning may be impaired by the heavy expenditure of effort toward orientation that the Internet requires. Learning may also depend on socialization, in that most Americans have grown up using linear media, whereas the Internet follows a more parallel format. The ability to learn from Internet content may also depend on individual expertise, including experience with Internet navigation and familiarity with computer technology. The high level of variability in quality and format across Internet information sources may also impair learning (Eveland and Dunwoody 2000).

More specific to politics, the format of online news in comparison to traditional media may also have negative consequences for information gain. In contrast to print media, Tewksbury and Althaus (1999) suggest that online news gives equal prominence to a wide range of news stories, allowing greater control over news consumption among Web users. This parallel structure, as opposed to a more linear and hierarchical narrative, however, means that news producers exert less influence over the attention of news consumers. In print form, newspapers provide strong cues to readers regarding the top stories of the day via article position, headline size and prominence, and article length (Graber 1988), and these cues guide readers, making it easier to survey what editors have determined to be the most important or top stories.

In a preliminary analysis comparing *New York Times* in print with *New York Times* online, Tewksbury and Althaus (1999) found that the relative rank and prominence of stories on the *New York Times* Web site did not match those in the print edition. Moreover, emphasis on the Web was placed on certain types of coverage content not traditionally given prominence in print, most notably technology news. In a comparison of experimental subjects reading the print versus the online editions of the newspapers, online readers were exposed to fewer articles regarding international, national, or political issues and were less likely to attend to stories that traditionally were grouped in the front section of most newspapers. Subjects exposed to the print edition were able to provide more detailed explanations of stories and had greater recognition of the week's events. Tewksbury and Althaus conclude that the fewer cues regarding the importance and prominence of stories online meant that individuals were more willing to use their interests as attention criterion.

Beyond serving as a vast repository for public affairs information and a powerful source of public affairs media coverage, the Internet has also been championed as a kind of new, electronic town meeting, enabling online users to engage in political discussions and deliberations with other citizens holding potentially diverse viewpoints from across the country or the world. This facet of the Internet appeals to a number of democratic ideals put forth by classical theorists, including the requirement that citizens should deliberate issues in knowledgeable face-to-face interactions with a diversity of neighbors, friends, and colleagues (Dewey 1954; Habermas 1989; Katz 1997). According to modern theorists, through an exposure to a diversity of political viewpoints, the public sphere is expanded (Habermas 1989) and the collective preferences of citizens acquire greater political legitimacy (Mill [1861] 1958).

The expansive freedom of the Internet and its abundance of choices, however, mean that no citizen is required to use the Internet for political discussion and that few individuals are likely to actually use it for such purposes. In fact, participation in online deliberation is itself a form of political activity and may be analogous to participation in a "real-world" political forum. Recent research has demonstrated that those individuals who are most likely to participate in public forums are individuals who are already politically motivated, resource-advantaged, have greater luxury of opportunity (Price et al. 2000), or who have stronger local ties or engage more frequently in political activities (McLeod et al. 1999). In a field experiment testing the assumption that those most likely to deliberate online are the already politically active, Price et al. (2001) invited a representative sample of Americans to participate in online discussions of the presidential race in the months preceding the 2000 election. Barriers to online participation were leveled by the allocation of free use of WebTV to members of the sample. Those individuals who did participate in the scheduled online discussions conformed to the hierarchical model of participation. They were older,

better educated, predominantly white, more politically knowledgeable, more politically interested and active, possessed higher levels of interpersonal trust, and had a greater ability to argue for or against their political positions.

Beyond this initial innovative study of online deliberation, however, there is an overwhelming absence of empirical inquiry on the relationship between Internet use and "real-world" political participation, with a few studies examining patterns of Internet usage or offering predictions on the effects of Internet use but providing no empirical tests of the Internet's direct link to participation (Selnow 1998; Davis 1999; Johnson and Kaye 1998; Sadow and James 1999; Graber and White 1999). In one of the handful of empirical investigations, employing limited Internet use measures from the 1998 American Election Survey, Bimber (2001) found that Internet use related to the election was unrelated to voter turnout or traditional forms of political participation, with the exception of donating money. In a second investigation, Putnam (2000), analyzing data from the DDB Needham Lifestyle survey, reports that after demographic controls, Internet users were indistinguishable from nonusers in levels of civic engagement. In a third study, using survey data taken from 1996 and 1998 Pew Foundation studies, Norris (1999) found that those who used the Internet for political purposes were already among the most informed, motivated, and interested. This same pattern was confirmed in an analysis of data taken from Euroborameter surveys for both more developed and less developed countries of Europe (Norris 1999).

### Research Questions

Due to the extremely limited findings about the relationship of Internet use to political participation, we decided to base our research on a set of relatively narrowly defined research questions instead of hypothesizing specific effects. Specifically, we put forth the following research questions: (1) Who are the citizens that use the Internet? And how do they differ from nonusers? (2) Can various types of Internet use increase levels of political information, political efficacy, and political participation among citizens? and (3) Are there differences between types of Internet use and traditional media use with respect to their impact on indicators of democratic citizenship?

### Method

Data for this study came from a telephone survey of 468 residents of Tompkins County, New York. The sample was based on a random-digit dialing technique and yielded a response rate of about 42 percent. Out of the total sample, 307 respondents (65 percent) reported having gone online at least once before to access the Internet or the Word Wide Web or to send or receive e-mail.

Question wording for the variables used in this study can be found in the appendix.

### Criterion Measures

Indicators of democratic citizenship were broken down into four dimensions: knowledge of political issues, traditional forms of political participation, participation in public forums, and political efficacy. *Knowledge of political issues* was an additive index of four factual, current-events knowledge questions about local and national politics (KR-20 = .66). *Traditional forms of political participation* were measured as a composite of eight measures of participatory behavior over the past year (KR-20 = .72). Our measure of nontraditional forms of participation of *forum participation* followed a conceptualization by McLeod et al. (1999). It combined three measures of participating in a forum, speaking out, and expressing opinions if faced with opposition into an additive index ($\alpha$ = .96). Our measure of *political efficacy* was a combination three ten-point scales ($\alpha$ = .66) measuring people's agreement with traditional indicators of efficacy.

### Antecedent Endogenous Variables

We controlled for a of number exogenous variables that are all expected to precede and potentially influence the relationship of communication behaviors on indicators of democratic citizenship. Specifically, we included age ($M$ = 43.3, $SD$ = 17.), gender (56 percent females), education ($M$ = 14.7 years of formal schooling), and income (mode between $30,000 and $40,000).

### Communication Variables

The key variables of interest are two groups of communication variables. First, we operationalized traditional types of media use using four content and medium-specific measures. *International and national television hard news use* was measured with two ten-point scales ($r$ = .85) tapping the amount of attention respondents paid to these types of content on television. *Entertainment television use* combined two measures of attention to sitcoms and crime and drama shows into an additive index ($r$ = .53). *National and international news use in newspapers* was measured using four items tapping attention and exposure to these types of content in newspapers ($\alpha$ = .93). Finally, *local newspaper news use* combined six measures of attention and exposure to local editorials, hard news stories, and human-interest stories into an additive index ($\alpha$ = .93).

The second group of communication variables in this study were types of Internet use. We asked respondents about the frequency with which they engaged in seven different types of Internet-based communication (for a complete list, see Table 1). Our initial conceptualization was based on the assumption that these items would cluster into three distinct groups: entertainment

**Table 1**

Dimensions of Web use

|  | Entertainment Purposes | Political Information | Nonpolitical Information |
|---|---|---|---|
| Online chats about personal issues | .84 | .04 | .06 |
| Online chats about political issues | .71 | .30 | .06 |
| Other entertainment purposes | .61 | −.09 | .43 |
| Seek information about local politics | .34 | .82 | .03 |
| Seek information about national politics | −.08 | .80 | .42 |
| Online shopping | .28 | .04 | .76 |
| Other educational purposes | −.12 | .36 | .73 |

*Note:* All coefficients are factor loadings (principal components, oblique rotation). The exact wording was, "How often do you go online for each of the following purposes? (1-10 scale)."

purposes, political information seeking, and nonpolitical information seeking. An exploratory factor analysis (principal components, oblique rotation) overall supported this notion (see Table 1). There was, however, a small but significant overlap between the two dimensions of political and nonpolitical information seeking ($r = .14, p < .05$), which was also reflected in a certain degree of cross-loading for one item in each of the dimensions. Given the overall low correlations between dimensions and the consistency between our initial conceptualization and the data, we decided to use the three dimensions as separate constructs in our analyses.

## Results

Before assessing the specific impacts of Internet-based forms of communication on indicators of democratic citizenship, we will give a brief overview of the respondents in our sample who had used the Internet at least once for any of the activities outlined earlier. Which demographic characteristics make them different from nonusers, and what other types of communication behavior do they engage in?

### Internet Users versus Nonusers

As outlined earlier, out of the total sample, 307 respondents (65 percent) reported having gone online at least once before to access the Internet or the Word Wide Web or to send or receive e-mail. Not surprisingly, the data did show significant differences between Internet users and nonusers for age, education, and income. Specifically, users were significantly younger with a mean age of 37.4 years versus 55.25 years for nonusers. Users also averaged about 2.5 years more of formal schooling than nonusers and had significantly higher income, with the mode of the nonuser group being in the $20,000 to $30,000 bracket and the mode of the user group being in the $30,000 to $40,000

bracket. However, we did not find any difference in the gender distribution between users and nonusers.

In addition to differences in standard demographics, we found users to hold significantly more liberal viewpoints, both economically and socially, than nonusers. This may be due in part to the nature of our sample. We will address this point in greater detail in the Conclusion section of this article.

Finally, we examined the degree to which Internet use is related to the use of other types of traditional mass media. Our data showed significant differences between Internet users and nonusers only for national and international newspaper use. All other types of mass media use were not significantly different for users and nonusers.

### Internet Use and Citizenship

As we have shown, not everybody uses the Internet, and those who do are significantly different from those who do not. More important, however, is the question, For those who do use the Internet, does it live up to the hype with respect to creating new standards for providing easy-to-access information to citizens and increasing engagement in the political process? At this stage of its development, our data suggest a very limited role for the Internet in promoting levels of efficacy, knowledge, and participation among the citizenry. The following ordinary least squares regression models examine each of the four criterion variables separately. For the within-sample comparisons among various groups of antecedents, we relied on before-entry betas, that is, coefficients representing the impact of a given variable with all previous blocks controlled for.

*Political efficacy.* Our first regression model examines political efficacy as the criterion variable (see Table 2). After demographic controls, which accounted for a significant 10.3 percent of the variance, newspaper use, both local ($\beta = .14$) and international and national ($\beta = .26$) were significantly related to feelings of political efficacy. National and international television use was unrelated to feelings of political efficacy, and use of entertainment television was in fact related to a significant decrease in feelings of political efficacy ($\beta = -.13$). Overall, traditional mass media accounted for about 7.8 percent of the variance in the criterion variable.

The three dimensions of Internet use showed a somewhat inconsistent pattern with respect to their relationships to political efficacy. Political information seeking was unrelated to feelings of political efficacy. Nonpolitical information seeking, however, showed a significant positive relationship to higher levels of political efficacy ($\beta = .12$). Respondents who frequently used the Internet for entertainment purposes felt less efficacious about politics ($\beta = -.13$). Overall, Internet use contributed 2.6 percent of the variance above and beyond demographic variables and other traditional forms of communication.

**Table 2**
Predicting efficacy and knowledge

|  | Political Efficacy | Political Knowledge |
|---|---|---|
| Demographics, *R*-square (%) | 10.3*** | 13.0** |
| Traditional media use |  |  |
|   Newspaper news (national and international) | .26*** | .30*** |
|   Newspaper news (local) | .14** | .20*** |
|   TV news (national and international) | .05 | .03 |
|   TV entertainment | −.13** | −.08 |
|   Incremental *R*-square (%) | 7.8*** | 9.5*** |
| Web use |  |  |
|   Political information seeking | .01 | −.03 |
|   Nonpolitical information seeking | .12** | .04 |
|   Entertainment | −.13*** | −.13** |
|   Incremental *R*-square (%) | 2.6** | 1.5 |
| Indicators of citizenship |  |  |
|   Political efficacy | — | .11* |
|   Political knowledge | .11* | — |
|   Forum participation | .05 | −.03 |
|   Traditional participation | .10* | .03 |
|   Incremental *R*-square (%) | 1.6 | 1.0 |
| Total *R*-square (%) | 22.3*** | 25.0*** |

*Note:* All betas are before-entry betas.
*$p$ < .10. **$p$ < .05. ***$p$ < .01.

    Finally, we controlled for the relationships between all indicators of democratic citizenship. When the remaining three indicators were entered into the model, we found marginally significant positive relationships between political knowledge and political efficacy ($\beta$ = .11) and between political efficacy and traditional participation ($\beta$ = .10).

    *Factual political knowledge*. For factual political knowledge as the criterion variable, controls for demographic predispositions account for about 13 percent of the variance. After these controls, traditional media contributed an additional 9.5 percent. This was mostly due to the links between national and international newspaper use ($\beta$ = .30) and local newspaper use ($\beta$ = .20) and factual political knowledge.

    Information seeking on the Internet—both political and nonpolitical—was unrelated to higher levels of factual political knowledge. Frequent users of the Internet for entertainment purposes, however, showed significantly lower levels of factual political knowledge ($\beta$ = −.13).

    Finally, local political knowledge was also related to higher levels of feelings of political efficacy. This relationship, however, was only marginally significant.

    *Forum participation*. In addition to potentially impacting feelings of efficacy and levels of factual knowledge, the question remains, To what degree is Internet use

**Table 3**

Predicting types of participation

|  | Forum Participation | Traditional Participation |
|---|---|---|
| Demographics, *R*-square (%) | 4.1** | 20.4*** |
| Traditional media use |  |  |
| Newspaper news (national and international) | .03 | .12** |
| Newspaper news (local) | .12** | .27*** |
| TV news (national and international) | .03 | .04 |
| TV entertainment | .01 | .02 |
| Incremental *R*-square (%) | 1.5 | 6.7*** |
| Web use |  |  |
| Political information seeking | .08 | −.00 |
| Nonpolitical information seeking | .11* | .06 |
| Entertainment | −.01 | −.00 |
| Incremental *R*-square (%) | 1.5 | 0.3 |
| Indicators of citizenship |  |  |
| Political efficacy | .06 | .09* |
| Political knowledge | −.03 | .03 |
| Forum participation | — | .25*** |
| Traditional participation | .32*** | — |
| Incremental *R*-square (%) | 7.8*** | 6.5*** |
| Total *R*-square (%) | 15.0*** | 33.9*** |

*Note:* All betas are before-entry betas.

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.

related to concrete behaviors and involvement in the political process? The first criterion variable we examined in this context is forum participation. Are people willing to attend public forums, participate in discussions there, and speak out, even if faced with others who hold opinions different from their own?

Consistent with previous research (e.g., McLeod et al. 1999), we found demographic controls to have a limited impact, with about 4 percent of the variance in forum participation accounted for by demographic variables (see Table 3).

Traditional media use also had only a limited influence on respondents' willingness to participate in public forums. Only local newspaper news use was significantly related to forum participation ($\beta$ = .12). Similarly, only one type of Internet use showed a marginal link to forum participation: nonpolitical information seeking at $\beta$ = .11. Finally, forum participation and traditional participation were significantly related at $\beta$ = .32.

*Traditional forms of participation*. Consistent with SES models of participatory behavior (for an overview, see Verba et al. 1995), demographic variables accounted for about a fifth of the variance in traditional participation. Above and beyond demographic controls, however, newspaper hard news use showed a significant impact on political participation. This included both international and

national newspaper news use ($\beta = .12$) and local newspaper news use ($\beta = .27$). Television news use and entertainment television use were unrelated to traditional forms of participation.

Above and beyond traditional forms of media use, however, none of the three types of Internet use showed a significant impact. Finally, traditional forms and forum participation were linked at $\beta = .25$.

## Conclusions

### Unjustified Optimism toward New Channels of Information and Engagement?

Our study examined the role of the Internet in promoting democratic citizenship from an empirical perspective. We agree at a normative level that the Internet has great potential to overcome some of the shortcomings of more traditional communication channels by overcoming space or time constraints that limit coverage in newspapers or on television news programs and also by providing information in a customized format that satisfies individual preferences rather than being tailored toward a specialized audience segment (Scheufele 2001).

Empirically, however, there has been little research that has backed the euphoric claims that have characterized the advent and subsequent development of the Internet. Our study provides this type of test. Across three dimensions of Internet use, we explore the role that the Internet can play in promoting democratic citizenship, that is, feelings of efficacy, levels of information, and various forms of engagement in democratic behavior.

### Some Comments on Our Data

In exploring these relationships, we relied on a local survey based on a carefully constructed probability sample. Regardless of the quality of the sample, however, one question arises. Does the local nature of the sample limit its generalizability? The answer is probably yes, if we talk very narrowly about geographical generalizability. The question misses the point, however. The relatively elaborate measures of Internet use and indicators of democratic citizenship are not available in large national data sets such as the American National Election Study (ANES) or the General Social Survey (GSS). The issue for a lot of survey-based research therefore becomes a trade-off between large-scale samples and quality of measurement. Given the fact that this study focused on relatively subtle distinctions between different types of interpersonal discussion and media use, we opted for the latter: quality of measurement.

This does not mean, however, that specific characteristics of our sample did not affect our research design at all. As outlined earlier, for example, we found respondents with more liberal viewpoints to be more likely to use the Internet.

This, of course, could be due to the generally more liberal climate that characterizes many college towns and surrounding areas combined with higher levels of Internet use in those areas. The fact that the potentially spurious link between ideological predispositions and Internet use was not explained away when levels of formal education were controlled for, however, makes this alternative explanation less likely.

In addition to potential limitations of our data set, we caution against overgeneralizations from research on the Internet at this stage of its development. This is in part due to the high degree of inconsistency as far as operationalizations and research design employed in different studies are concerned. Over the next few years, we will likely see more consistent approaches to how dimensions of Internet use are measured. This includes both content areas that users attend to and the frequency of use. We especially caution against overgeneralizations from our comparisons of traditional media use and Internet use. Most operationalizations of Internet use are still exploratory and have not been refined over the course of decades of research, as is the case for measures of newspaper use or television viewing. In addition to methodological inconsistencies, however, the Internet is currently in a stage of constant development. New modes of information exchange constantly evolve and change the way people use the Internet. Findings based on current modes of Internet use might therefore have only limited applicability in the long run.

## So What *Does* the Internet Do for Democracy?

With these considerations in mind, our results show that—at this stage of its development—the role of the Internet in promoting active and informed citizenship is minimal. In fact, respondents who used the Internet frequently for entertainment purposes were less likely to feel efficacious about their potential role in the democratic process and also knew less about facts relevant to current events.

Regardless of the frequency with which people use the Internet for various informational or entertainment purposes, our analyses suggest that traditional mass media maintain a key role in promoting democratic citizenship. In particular, newspaper hard news use—at a local, national, and international level—is a crucial tool for disseminating information about political issues and processes among the public and, ultimately, one of the strongest predictors of participation in the political processes.

But what do our findings mean for the future of the Internet as a tool for efficiently informing and mobilizing large cross-sections of the population, especially those who are traditionally not exposed to mainstream print and broadcast media? For now, the Internet's role is limited. While it may create a *subjective sense* of efficaciousness among its users, the Internet does not lead to *objectively measurable* changes in political involvement or information.

Labeling the Internet a new "public sphere" is therefore premature. Chat rooms and other Internet-based forms of communication and information seeking intuitively have great potential to enrich democratic processes and increase participation. At this point, however, this potential has not been tapped. And for the future, these findings strongly suggest that the false sense of personal efficacy that can be created by some forms of Internet use will not translate into real political empowerment unless traditional media channels supplement it. The road to renewed civic engagement appears to lead through news in print.

## Appendix
## Indicators of Citizenship

### Political Efficacy

Here is a list of statements people have made about local politics. Would you tell me how you feel about each of the following statements on a 10-point scale where 1 means *strongly disagree* and 10 means *strongly agree?*

- People like me have no say in what local government does.
- Sometimes local politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on.
- Local officials don't care much what people like me think.

### Political Knowledge

Next, I would like to ask you a few questions about local politicians and political events. Of course, there are so many issues and events taking place these days that it is impossible to keep track of all of them. But can you tell me

- The name of the mayor of Ithaca?
- Name a U.S. Senator from New York?
- Can you tell me who Richard Eckstrom is or what he does?
- Who appoints an independent counsel at the federal level?

### Forum Participation

If you were called to attend a local forum about that issue (previously nominated as "most important issue," where citizens discuss local or community problems), would you attend?

[IF YES] On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 means *not at all likely* and 10 means *very likely*, how likely would it be for you to speak up at the meeting?

On the same scale, how likely would it be for you to express an opinion that is different from those of others at the meeting?

## Traditional Participation

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about your participation in local political or community life. Would you please tell me if in the past two years you have

- Attended a neighborhood meeting?
- Written a letter to the local editor or called in to a local radio station?
- Circulated a petition for a local candidate or issue?
- Voted for a locally elected official?
- Worked for a political campaign locally?
- Contacted a local public official?
- Called other people to raise funds for local organizations?
- Contributed money to local organizations?

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