Chapter II

The Impact of the Internet on Political Activism: Evidence from Europe

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Abstract

The core issue for this study concerns less the social than the political consequences of the rise of knowledge societies; in particular, the capacity of the Internet for strengthening democratic participation and civic engagement linking citizens and government. To consider these issues, Part I summarizes debates about the impact of the Internet on the public sphere. The main influence of this development, as it is theorized in a market model, will be determined by the “supply” and “demand” for electronic information and communications about government and politics. Demand, in turn, is assumed to be heavily dependent upon the social characteristics of Internet users and their prior political orientations. Given this understanding, the study predicts that the primary impact of knowledge societies in democratic societies will be upon facilitating cause-oriented and civic forms of political activism, thereby strengthening social movements and interest groups, more than upon conventional channels of political participation exemplified by voting, parties, and election campaigning. Part II summarizes the sources of survey data and the key measures of political activism used in this study, drawing upon the 19-nation
Introduction

The rise of knowledge societies represents one of the most profound transformations that has occurred in recent decades. The diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) promises to have major social consequences by expanding access to education and training, broadening channels of expression and social networks, as well as revolutionizing the nature of work and the economy. The primary impact of this development has been evident in affluent societies, but the Internet has also been widely regarded as an important instrument for social change in poorer nations around the globe (Franda, 2002; UN, 2002).

Part I: Theories of the Impact of Knowledge Societies on Democracy

There are multiple theories about how the growth of knowledge societies could potentially influence civic engagement in contemporary democracies. Four main perspectives can be identified in the literature.

The Internet as a Virtual Agora

The most positive view is held by cyber-optimists who emphasize the Panglossian possibilities of the Internet for the involvement of ordinary citizens in direct, deliberative, or “strong” democracy. Digital technologies are thought to hold promise as a mechanism facilitating alternative channels of civic engagement exemplified by political chat rooms, remote electronic voting in elections, referenda, plebiscites, and the mobilization of virtual communities, thereby revitalizing levels of mass participation in public affairs (Barber, 1998; Budge, 1996). This view was certainly popular as the Internet rapidly expanded in the United States during the mid-1990s and the radical potential of digital technologies for democracy continues to be expressed by enthusiasts today (Gilder, 2000; Rash, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Schwartz, 1996).
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