Chapter 11
Political Dropouts and the Internet Generation

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ABSTRACT

Daunting obstacles remain to the Internet's becoming a source of political information for a segment of the population as wide as there was for newspapers and television during their heydays – obstacles not in the form of access but rather of skills. With increasing dependence on digital information and tools, citizens are expected to exercise independent, informed judgments in order to make use of the information and tools, but the skills involved in those judgments are very unequally distributed. This unequal distribution, as in other domains, reflects class differences, but also generational ones. These are different cross-nationally and for the generation that grew up with the Internet due especially to differences in efforts to narrow the gap through policies designed to disseminate the needed knowledge and skills.

INTRODUCTION

Recent transformations in the family and community have made the young citizen's civic duty to vote and otherwise participate politically less compelling. The same is true of voluntary associations. Membership in traditional groups that teach young people what it means to be part of a community are being replaced by electronically-linked peer groups that more readily bypass traditional information gatekeepers and authorities.

This places more of a burden on the schools and the information media. Informed political participation, especially when the sense of civic duty to vote is weak, is dependent on a politically literate citizenry. Political literacy entails a minimal familiarity with the relevant institutions of decision making, combined with a basic knowledge of the key positions on relevant issues and some ability to distinguish the key political

actors holding them. The crucial characteristic is attentiveness to the political world. The key means of doing so is via the information media, while it is the schools that must increasingly develop the habits and skills needed for effective media attentiveness.

Young people reaching adulthood after 1990 entered a world fundamentally transformed by the revolution in communications technology from that of earlier generations. The revolution in information and communications technology (ICT), combining the home computer, digitalization, and the high-speed Internet, has radically transformed the patterns of media use. Following upon the multichannel, remote-controlled television universe, this latest transformation is unique, indeed revolutionary, in its comprehensive and multidimensional character, in its simultaneous and integrated transformation of the medium of communication and the nature of the content, and in its interactivity.

Given the complexity and recentness of the transformation, there is no consensus about its effects. For every observer who is persuaded that the unlimited information and increased intensity of communication will foster an increase in political communication and political knowledge, and, therefore, political participation, there is another observer who fears that its effect will be to reinforce the participation gap between the politically engaged and the dropouts. Indeed, both are right: there will be heightened political communication and knowledge will widen the gap between the engaged and the dropouts.[1]

In this chapter I set out the arguments on both sides and cite several important cases from the literature they are based on. I find that daunting obstacles remain to the Internet's becoming a source of political information for as wide a segment of the population as were newspapers and (pre multichannel) television, obstacles not in the form of access but rather of skills. The skills involved in making judgments using digital information and

tools are unequally distributed along the usual class lines but also generational ones. Moreover, there appear to be important cross-national differences, which are largely based on efforts to narrow the gap through policies designed to disseminate the needed knowledge and skills.

What is not in question is that the Internet is here to stay as the basic media information environment for emerging generations. During the 2008 US elections, the Internet displaced newspapers as the second source – after television – for national and international news, while among young people it even rivaled television as the leading source.[2]

For good or bad, as a way of becoming informed and communicating about politics and public affairs, the Internet is here to stay. There are some grounds for expecting the new digital technologies to boost civic literacy (the proportion of citizens with the knowledge and skills to be effective citizens) but even stronger grounds for anticipating them to exacerbate class-based gaps in such knowledge and skills. If so, the fundamental challenge is to assure that those lacking an information-rich family or community environment – the potential political dropouts – gain the skills appropriate to that environment.

THE INTERNET AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION

The Internet (shorthand for the combination of the personal computer, digitalization, wireless links, PDAs and the high-speed Internet) is a new medium of information alongside newspapers, radio and television – but it is also a new medium of communication that has transformed every existing form of communication. Its arrival signals a simultaneous and integrated transformation of the very nature of the content (which is not merely sound, as in the telephone, or text and graphics as in the newspaper, or pictures and video – but all of

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