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# Digital Renaissance: Young Consumer and Citizen?

By  
CLAES H. DE VREESE

This article explores the relationship between Internet use among young people, their political consumption, and their political participation. The study widens the notion of online civic and political engagement and includes measures of active and passive forms of participation. To test a number of hypotheses developed on the basis of extant research, a survey was conducted in 2006 among 2,404 young Dutch respondents (aged sixteen to twenty-four). The results demonstrate the importance of the Internet for political activities for young people. They also show that most online activities (ranging from news use, peer communication, and consumption to online service use) are positively related to political participation. Contrary to common wisdom, this article shows that the young online consumer is also politically active.

*Keywords:* Internet; political engagement; youth; consumerism

The term *renaissance man* suggests an individual who has multiple skills and qualities, who knows a bit about a lot, and who can cover a whole spectrum of activities. Based on extant research, this is not the first term that comes to mind when thinking about young persons and their political engagement. Despite the focus on the enabling and empowering qualities of the Internet, many studies of young people and the Internet have not provided empirical evidence in support of an improved or revived civic youth culture online. This article addresses the question of how Internet use among young persons relates to their civic and political engagement and participation. The

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study investigates different uses of the Internet and proposes different forms of online civic and political participation. It shows that most Internet activities such as online communication, services use, and consumer behavior are positively related to different dimensions of civic and political participation.

Political participation among youth is a well-established field of research (and issue of concern). Research in the past has explored the relationship between media use and political participation (e.g., Shah, Kwak, and Holbert 2001), and today's media environment has if anything increased the relevance of looking at information and media use patterns to understand variation in political engagement. The media use among young people has been described by Rideout, Roberts, and Foehr (2005, 60), commenting on U.S. eight- to eighteen-year-olds, as follows: "Without question, this generation truly is the media generation, devoting more than a quarter of each day to media. As media devices become increasingly portable, and as they spread even further through young people's environments—from their schools, to their cars, to their pockets (e.g., cell phones with TV, audio, print, video gaming, and online capabilities)—media messages will become an even more ubiquitous presence in an already media-saturated world. Anything that takes up this much space in young people's lives deserves our full attention."

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*The young online consumer is also  
politically active.*

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The centrality of media (in the widest sense of the word) is a starting point for this study. However, to better understand the relationship between media use and civic and political engagement, the notions of civic and political engagement are in need of further consideration.

*Civic and political engagement: Broadening the scope*

General wisdom suggests that youth civic and political engagement is in decline and that extensive media use (in particular conceptualized as time spent with the media) facilitates this decline (e.g., Putnam 1995). However, some studies have suggested that the "decline" in interest and engagement among youth has more to do with negative or critical attitudes and ideas vis-à-vis politics (e.g., Henn, Weinstein, and Wring 2002) rather than a decline in interest. Yet other researchers have pointed to the limited conceptualization of political engagement in most research (Norris 2003). Dunleavy (1996) emphasized that "mainstream political behavior research has been criticized for its lack of engagement with political involvement in community-based or protest movements, and its

unchanging reliance on institutional measures of participation.” The focus has been on traditional politics, defined as “party politics, interest in government and voting” (Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper 2005, 288). A plea for widening the conceptualization of political and civic engagement finds resonance in several places (Barnhurst 1998; Dahlgren 2000; de Vreese 2006), and the Internet accentuates the need to investigate less traditional forms of engagement and participation.

The Internet offers a vast opportunity to be politically engaged: searching for information, at your discretion, from your preferred source, at your preferred time, and in your preferred mode. The Internet thus, in principle, increases the opportunities for individuals to be part of civic and political discussion and for becoming informed (Dahlgren 2000). The Internet provides particular potential for young people who are often politically engaged at local levels and in untraditional forms of participation (Delli Carpini 2000; O’Toole et al. 2003). The alternative forms of political participation taking place via the Internet can also be considered political engagement. After all, participation in both an election meeting and an online forum express political engagement (Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper 2005; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). Digital modes of political participation include forums, polls, discussion groups, or organizing a Web site on a civic or political issue. One can also think of traditional participation in an electronic mode, such as downloading PDF files of election programs or sending an e-mail to an elected officer or the media.

### *Internet use: Opening the box*

Previous research has focused mostly on the potential negative consequences of Internet use for political engagement and participation. However, some of this evidence has been questioned (Kraut et al. 1998; Nie and Erbring 2002), and later studies have shown both negative and positive effects (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Katz and Rice 2002; Shah et al. 2005). Indeed, for example, Kraut et al (2002) revised their original negative hypothesis (Kraut et al. 1998). In later studies, it has also been argued that differentiation is needed in the measures of use of the Internet and in the discussion of possible effects. Shah et al. (2005) emphasized that if different use is observed, different effects should be expected. It is indeed not so much the time spent online, but rather what is done online that matters (Shah et al. 2005; Shah, McLeod, and Yoon 2001; Schönbach, de Waal, and Lauf 2005). Nonetheless, most studies have been limited in the range of online activities that have been considered; some have tended to take a rather isolationist view of the Internet (rather than considering it in the context of other media); and finally, most studies have focused on particular forms of political engagement and participation.

## Expectations

Based on the considerations outlined above, this article tests a number of expectations. First, we expect that (Hypothesis 1) news consumption (in traditional and online media) is positively related to political engagement and participation

(see also Shah, McLeod, and Yoon 2001). Based on findings suggesting that some young people tend to act as active Internet “inter-actors” (Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper 2005) and multitaskers, we next expect (Hypothesis 2) that online activity in general is positively related to online political participation. Third, we expect that (Hypothesis 3) interactive online communication is positively related to political engagement and participation. Finally, we expect, given the centrality of the Internet for young persons, that (Hypothesis 4) the importance of the Internet exceeds the explanatory value of “traditional media use” for understanding variation in political engagement and participation.

## Method

To test the proposed relationships between differentiated measures of youth Internet use and different dimensions of civic and political engagement, a survey was conducted among Dutch youth. Ten thousand respondents in the age group sixteen to twenty-four were drawn from the TAPPS database and invited to fill in an online survey. Of these, 2,849 respondents started filling in the survey and 2,404 completed it ( $M$  age = 19.2 years,  $SD$  = 2.29), resulting in a 24 percent response rate. This is an acceptable result for an online survey among this age group (Cook, Heath, and Thompson 2000). It was essential to collect new data for this research project, as existing data sets do not contain the necessary combination of variables. We chose an online survey design given our key interest in different uses of the Internet and their relation to different dimensions of civic and political engagement. We aimed not to make inferences about individuals who are online and offline but to be able to differentiate between different types of online behavior. This choice should also be seen in light of the very high degree of Internet penetration (80+ percent) in the Netherlands.

The survey was administered by the ComLab at the Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam in February 2006. The average completion time was 9 minutes and 38 seconds. The survey contained detailed media use questions, questions about civic and political engagement, and a number of (social-demographic) background variables.

In this article, the key dependent measures pertain to *political participation*. We focus here on digital, online forms of participation. Digital participation was tapped using a battery of items measuring the frequency with which respondents participated in online political activities. A factor analysis (principal component analysis [PCA] with Varimax extraction) yielded two distinguishable factors, one labeled *digital passive participation* and one labeled *digital active participation*. The two factors (eigenvalues 3.82 and 1.07) explained 42 and 12 percent of the variance, respectively. Two scales were formed. Digital passive participation ( $M$  = 2.89,  $SD$  = 0.89) was measured using three items. All items asked respondents to indicate (on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* to *very frequently*) how often they in relation to political issues (1) visit Web sites of their local community,

(2) visit Web sites of the government and public administration, and (3) visit Web sites with political content. The items form an internally consistent scale with  $\alpha = .77$ . Digital active participation ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) was also measured using three items. Again, all items asked respondents to indicate (on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* to *very frequently*) how often they in relation to political issues (1) react online to a message or article on the Internet, (2) sign an online petition, and (3) participate in online polls. The three items form an acceptable scale of digital active participation, with  $\alpha = .59$ .

The key *independent* variables relate to media use. Media use can be tapped in different ways (Chaffee 1986; Prior 2005). When investigating media effects, the construction of media exposure and attention variables should be dependent on the features of the actual media content (see Slater [2004] for this argument and de Vreese and Boomgaarden [2006] for an example and discussion). In this study, we distinguish between newspaper reading, different types of television viewing, and different types of Internet use. In addition, we tap *reading time* (newspapers, with a separate measure of reading free dailies), *viewing time* (television), and *surfing time* (Internet).

For *newspaper use*, a self-reported measure taps the frequency of reading different newspapers. For each title, respondents indicated how often they read the title, ranging from *never*, *1-2 days a week*, *3-4 days a week*, to *5-7 days a week*. A combined measure of newspaper reading (standardized to range from 1 to 5) was constructed ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ). For *television use*, we asked respondents to indicate how often they watched different channels ranging from *never*, *1-2 days a week*, *3-4 days a week*, to *5-7 days a week*. A factor analysis yielded two distinct factors of viewing behavior (eigenvalue 3.98 and 1.85) explaining 31 and 14 percent of the variance, respectively. The two factors represent public channels viewing ( $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ) and commercial channel viewing ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ).

Since a main purpose of the study was to differentiate between types of Internet use, we included a list of Internet activities. A factor analysis yielded four distinguishable factors (eigenvalues 2.91, 1.99, 1.37, 1.10; explained variance 18 percent, 12 percent, 9 percent and 7 percent, totaling 46 percent). The first is a three-item measure of *Internet news use* (visiting newspaper sites, following news blogs, reading showbiz news) ( $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ,  $\alpha = .59$ ). The second is a three-item measure of *Internet services use* (e-banking, job searching, house searching) ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ,  $\alpha = .65$ ). The third is a two-item measure of *Internet entertainment use* (entertainment downloading, music listening) ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ,  $\alpha = .69$ ). The fourth is a measure of using the Internet to keep up to date about *club or associations activities* ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). We finally included measures for the frequency of different types of Internet communication (measured on a 5-point scale): e-mailing ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ), social networking (chatting, online communities) ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), and forum participation ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ). These types of Internet and communication use bear some resemblance with Norris and Jones's (1998) distinction between researchers (news users), home consumers (services), political expressives (forum use), and party animals (entertainment use).

Finally, we included a number of control variables. Given the homogeneity of the respondents in terms of age, we discarded this factor ( $M = 19.2$  years,  $SD = 2.29$ ). Key controls are gender (60 percent female) and educational level (measured on a 4-point scale of educational level,  $M = 1.76$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ). Following Prior (2005), we also included a measure of *relative entertainment preference* (REP) (measures as entertainment viewing)/(entertainment viewing + news viewing). Respondents could choose, in five rounds, between two programs (entertainment versus news/current affairs). REP was recoded to range from 0 to 1 with higher values expressing a relative entertainment preference ( $M = .73$ ,  $SD = .24$ ). We expect that in an abundant media choice situation, an intrinsic preference for entertainment products above news and current affairs is negatively related to political engagement and participation. We also included a control for *political engagement*, which was measured using three items (5-point Likert scales). The items (1: To me it is important to follow political discussions; 2: It is important for society that as many people as possible follow political discussions; 3: Politics is interesting) form a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .79$ ) ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ).

## Results

In the investigation of how media use relates to political participation among young people, we see (Table 1) that (following hypothesis 1) news consumption in both traditional and online media is positively related to political participation. However, the relationships between traditional media use (newspapers and television) are weak and, except for public television viewing in the case of traditional digital participation, all below the threshold of significance. Online news use is positively and significantly related to both forms of online participation. Hypothesis 1 is therefore partially supported.

Looking at the variety of online activities, we find that use of online services (such as e-banking), keeping updated with clubs and associations, as well as consumption of entertainment products, including music downloading, are all significantly related to our dependent variables. All relationships are positive, except between music and entertainment consumption and digital passive participation. Hypothesis 2, which predicted these positive relationships, is therefore largely confirmed. Similarly, we can confirm hypothesis 3, which suggested that interactive online communication is positively related to political participation. Finally, as expected (hypothesis 4), the explanatory value of Internet use exceeds the explanatory value of "traditional media use" for understanding variation in political engagement and participation. The Internet block of variables accounts for 15 percent (passive) and 26 percent (active) of explained variation, while the traditional media use variables account for 14 percent (passive) and 5 percent (active) of the variation (this finding is not reported in Table 1).

We find no effects of our sociodemographic controls (gender and education). We find an expected negative relationship between relative entertainment preference

TABLE 1  
 DIGITAL PASSIVE AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION:  
 THE POSITIVE RELATIONS BETWEEN CONSUMPTION AND POLITICS

	Digital Passive Participation		Digital Active Participation	
	Beta	SE	Beta	SE
Controls				
Gender (female)	-.03	.03	-.01	-.03
Education	.00	.01	-.01	.01
Print media				
Reading time (newspaper)	.00	.01	-.02	.01
Reading time free (newspaper)	.00	.01	.02	.01
Newspaper reading	-.01	.01	-.01	.02
Television				
Viewing time TV	.01	.01	.02	.01
Public viewing	.11***	.02	.02	.02
Commercial viewing	-.01	.02	.04	.03
Relative entertainment preference (REP)	-.14***	.06	-.08***	.06
Internet				
Surfing time	.00	.00	-.02	.01
News	.20***	.02	.19***	.02
Services	.20***	.02	.04*	.02
Music/entertainment	-.05*	.01	.06***	.01
Club	.04*	.01	.05**	.01
E-mail	.07***	.02	.04*	.02
Online networking	-.01	.01	.04*	.01
Forum	.06***	.01	.37***	.01
Political engagement	.26***	.01	.12***	.02
N	2,404		2,404	
R <sup>2</sup>	.38		.33	

NOTE: Entries are standardized beta coefficients and standard errors.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

and participation and a positive relationship between political engagement and digital forms of online participation.

## Discussion

This article set out to investigate the relationship between Internet use among young people and their “political consumption” and political participation. The article emphasizes that Internet use has to be understood in more detail. First,

we found that use of news and current affairs media, both offline and online, is generally positively related to online political engagement and participation for young people but that online news use is a stronger predictor for online participation. The study also shows that it is not the time spent online (or with another medium) that matters but rather the activities that are undertaken (see Shah et al. [2005] for corroborating evidence). The study moved beyond the established positive effects of news use and also included online communication, use of digital services, and being part of online networks and communities. These activities were all found to be positively related to political participation. The study thus supports Putnam's (1995) idea that social networks are positively related to political participation, though the networks alluded to by Putnam were more likely to be offline. Our findings corroborate the observation that social networks matter, but very importantly point out that *online* social networking and interactivity with others is also good for political participation.

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*It is not the time spent online . . . that  
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that are undertaken.*

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The study found robust positive relationships between diverse uses of the Internet, including services and consumption, and various measures of engagement and participation. We applied a broad notion of political participation and identified in particular digital forms of online participation. Online communication and activities were found to be more important for digital forms of political participation. In essence, it suggests that among young people, communicating online and making use of online services correlate strongly, significantly, and robustly with online political participation (such as, for example, taking part in online polls, online petitions, e-mail letters to the editor, etc). This suggests that a specific kind of "digital citizenship" is observable. These findings run somewhat counter to the typology suggested by Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper (2005), who found that civic-minded young persons was a distinct category, while our findings show that civic-mindedness, digital political participation, consumption, and online social networking can go hand in hand.

The study has a number of caveats. While it is positive that we were able to include differentiated measures of Internet use and differentiated measures of political participation to study the consumption of politics in an appropriate context, the survey is obviously limited in its cross-sectional nature to only speculate about the

causal direction of the relationships observed. Also, our focus on online young citizens (and our use of an online survey instrument) has advantages, but it also makes us cautious in the interpretations. Our “nonfindings” of newspaper impact on participation could be influenced by our sample, in which readership might be less prominent than in a nononline sample. These reservations notwithstanding, we have taken a step forward toward understanding young persons’ media use and its relationship with political engagement and participation. The contours of a renaissance young person who can be both an online consumer *and* a citizen are visible.

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*The contours of a renaissance young person  
who can be both an online consumer and  
citizen are visible.*

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