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Bakker, T.P.

Publication date

2013

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bakker, T. P. (2013). *Citizens as political participants: The myth of the active online audience?* [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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CITIZENS AS POLITICAL PARTICIPANTS

**THE MYTH OF
THE ACTIVE
ONLINE
AUDIENCE?**

Tom Bakker

CITIZENS AS POLITICAL PARTICIPANTS THE MYTH OF THE ACTIVE ONLINE AUDIENCE? | Tom Bakker

Citizens as political participants

The myth of the active online audience?

Citizens as political participants. The myth of the active online audience?
ISBN 978-94-6191-613-6

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Amsterdam, 2013

Cover & layout by Jan Schoen, Studio Scarpa
Printed by Ipskamp Drukkers, Enschede

Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR)
Kloveniersburgwal 48
1012 CX Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Citizens as political participants: The myth of the active online audience?

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. D.C. van den Boom

ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op dinsdag 26 februari 2013, te 14.00 uur
door Tom Pieter Bakker
geboren te Zaanstad

Promotiecommissie:

Promotor: Prof. dr. K. Schönbach
Copromotor: Prof. dr. C.H. de Vreese

Overige leden: Prof. dr. C. Neuberger
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Dr. R.J.W. van der Wurff

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragwetenschappen

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The advent of participatory media has led scholars and pundits alike to expect a fundamental reconfiguration of the triadic relationship between journalists, politics, and citizens. The emergence of the technical possibilities provided by the Internet has enabled ordinary citizens to seemingly effortlessly produce, share, publish and distribute information without requiring access to expensive printing presses or cable networks. Using participatory media like weblogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and discussion forums, citizens are no longer necessarily passive news consumers. They are now able to enter in greater numbers the public and political debate.

It is argued that increased participation of citizens is a welcome contribution for public discourse, because it allows for more diverse, open and interactive information and discussions. The revolutionary potential of participatory media is well reflected in number of book (sub)titles from the last decade: “How audiences are shaping the future of news and information” (Bowman & Willis, 2003), “How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture” (Rodzvilla, 2002), “Understanding the Information Reformation That’s Changing Your World” (Hewitt, 2005), “How the Newest Media Revolution is Changing Politics, Business, and Culture” (Kline & Burnstein, 2005) and “The Prospects for Political Renewal through the Internet” (Shane, 2004). Perhaps the most exemplary and influential work is “We the Media” (Gillmor, 2004), in which the author sketches a media landscape in which previously inactive citizens will finally stand up to collectively share facts, ideas and opinions with fellow citizens with no or little help from news media:

After Gutenberg, the word of God was liberated from the Pope’s doctrine. The Internet is the most important medium since the printing press. (...) When anyone can be a writer, in the largest sense and for a global audience, many of us will be. The Net is overturning so many things we’ve assumed about media and business models that we can scarcely keep up with the changes (p. 236).

Others, however, have voiced serious concerns over the rise of increased political and journalistic participation, as most citizens are not thought to be capable to perform the role of professional gatekeepers, which requires objectively and ethically selecting, filtering, interpreting and publishing news. An exponent of this perspective is the author and Internet entrepreneur

Andrew Keen (2007), who summarized the consequences of the increased participation of citizens as follows:

This blurring of lines between the audience and the author, between fact and fiction, between invention and reality further obscures objectivity. The cult of the amateur has made it increasingly difficult to determine the difference between reader and writer, between artist and spin doctor, between art and advertisement, between amateur and expert. The result? The decline of the quality and reliability of the information we receive, thereby distorting, if not outrightly corrupting, our national civic conversation (p. 27).

While both camps disagree on the potential benefits and threats of citizens' participation in the journalistic process, they are united in the notion that the technological developments have a substantial impact on journalism and even society at large. But although both sides are quick to substantiate their arguments with an impressive body of case studies and anecdotal evidence, there is a serious lack of systematic studies that investigates the degree, nature, and impact of citizen participation in the realm of news and politics. This dissertation sheds more light on the nature of citizens' participation in the realm of journalism and politics in the Netherlands, answering basic questions such as: how many people are actually participating, what characteristics do these people have, on which platforms are they participating, what content do they produce, and what are their goals? These questions are informed by key media and communication theories about the powerful role of media in deciding what becomes news and how that news reaches the public (gatekeeping, two-step flow of information, agenda-setting). As it has been repeatedly argued that the functioning of the public sphere is affected as a result of the diminished role of professional journalists and the increased prominence of participatory media, it is important to examine to critically re-examine the relationship between politics, media and citizens.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I will first discuss the development of citizen journalism and participatory media and their relevance for political communication research. After determining the main questions that have hitherto been left unanswered, I will formulate the main research questions and sketch the outline of the dissertation.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

The notion that citizens should and could be more actively involved in the news process already started in the early nineties – before the Internet – with the emergence of civic or public journalism, a movement that aimed at closing an alleged gap that had emerged between citizens and journalists. Proponents of this movement appealed to journalists and news organizations to more actively approach and use citizens in the information gathering and production process. The basic idea is that when citizens and journalists closely collaborate, participate in meetings and debates and publicly discuss relevant information, this would benefit the local community and would do justice to the important democratic role of journalism in society (for overviews, see Black, 1997; Charity, 1995; Glasser, 1999; Merrill, Gade, & Blevens, 2001; Rosen & Merritt, 1994). Also, considered as a “radical, inclusive form of civic journalism” (Atton, 2003, p. 267), the various ‘alternative media’ movements in the last decades reserved a key role for citizens in the news production process (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001). Although the ideals of the public journalism movement may never have fully materialized on a wider scale, the idea that citizens can and should play an active role has survived until today, with the Internet as the most important driver and facilitator (Nip, 2006, 2008; St. John III, 2007; Witt, 2004).

Of course there have always been forms of citizen participation in the news process in the form of letters-to-the-editors and calls to the newsroom. But the Internet and all digital, wireless and easy-to-use publishing tools have substantially lowered the entry barriers for participation. Today, news organizations more actively call upon their audience to assist them in their news gathering process by sending in digital photos, video footage or other newsworthy information. Particularly during events like natural disasters (e.g., the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, 2005 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans) and crisis situations (9/11 attacks, 2004 Madrid train bombings) *user-generated content* (UGC) has resulted in a vast amount of audiovisual material that has reached the front pages and broadcasts of mainstream media. Despite extensive start-up costs and many failed initiatives, most news organizations have integrated the use of UGC one way or another (e.g., Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007; Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer, & Vujanovic, 2008; Thurman, 2008).

But citizens' participation of course reaches further than assisting traditional news organizations. Weblogs and media platforms like YouTube have allowed citizens to create their own information outlets, circumventing the editorial processes of traditional news media. For example, the popularity of Facebook, with more than 900 million monthly active users (newsroom.fb.com), has led to an alternative and worldwide news and opinion ecosystem that operates independently from mainstream news organizations. Also exemplary for the participatory age is the ability for citizens to consume unedited and extensive content that is derived directly from online political sources (e.g., U.S. president Obama's Weekly Address on YouTube).

Vivid expressions have been proposed to describe new and alternative forms of information provision about public affairs, such as *pro-am journalism* (Rosen, 2006), *grassroots journalism*, *networked journalism* (Jarvis, 2006), *open-source journalism* (Leonard, 1999), *crowdsourced journalism* or *distributed journalism*. However, the prevailing terms in popular and scientific literature are *citizen journalism* and *participatory journalism*. The most common definition of participatory journalism comes from Bowman and Willis (2003), which reads:

The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires (p. 9).

Jay Rosen (2008), making a pun on one of Prince's various designations, defined citizen journalism as follows:

When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism (para. 1).

While all former definitions speak of 'journalism', it is of course the question if, or to what extent, these online activities can be labeled as 'journalism'. Instead of going into this normative discussion, I will in this dissertation use a general view to describe the wide variety of online citizen activities in order to

provide a general picture of what citizens' contributions to the political and journalistic realm entail. How often are they contributing, on which platforms, in which forms and with what goal? In order to expand our knowledge about how and where people produce information, and what the nature of this content is, a broad approach is employed and various forms of citizen contributions are included: facts and opinion; discussion content; uploads; short and long contributions; citizen content within and outside the online platforms of professional news organizations. Throughout the dissertation, I will therefore speak of 'citizen participation' and 'participatory media'.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA AND POLITICS

Although divergent visions exist on the role of citizens in a democracy (Dahlberg, 2011; Held, 2006; Strömbäck, 2005), the increased online participation opportunities have led scholars to rethink the traditional relationship between citizens, politics and media. Media and communication theories have traditionally attributed an influential role to mainstream media with regard to the creation and provision of a common core of basic information. Media are found to influence citizens' political opinion formation and change, cognitions, perceptions and behavior (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2009). From this perspective, it is not surprising that in recent years communication scholars have started to wonder how the emergence of participatory media impacts longstanding notions about the pivotal role of mainstream media in aggregating information, relaying news to the public and serving as a political discussion platform. Below, I summarize the most important consequences of increased citizen participation for journalism on the one hand and politics on the other.

IMPACT ON MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

PERFORMANCE OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA. Participatory media have substantially lowered the barrier for citizens to express their concerns about the performance of mainstream media. Particularly in the United States, so-called media watchblogs are popular. For example, American media watchblogs have been credited with the resignation of long-time CBS news anchor Dan Rather who was held responsible for presenting manipulated documents about George W. Bush' draft for military service (Hayes, 2008). In Germany

BILDblog is a typical media watchblog, while GeenStijl functions as such in the Netherlands. But also less organized and sustained initiatives by individual citizens, such as publishing media commentary on Twitter, blogs and forums, are aimed at criticizing and correcting professional journalists and news organizations.

Some believe that the cooperation of professional journalists with 'amateurs' endangers the profession because it will blur and weaken professional standards such as neutrality and objectivity (Keen, 2007), practices that, in general terms, demarcate the boundaries of professional journalism (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Further, more news organizations report that the daily practice of dealing with citizen content is very time and energy consuming while the content has a high chance to be inaccurate, partisan and opinionated (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Nah & Chung, 2009). Based on surveys and interviews with journalistic professionals in the UK, Hermida and Thurman (2008) conclude: "Our study suggests that, in the longer term, established news organisations are shifting towards the retention of a traditional gate-keeping role towards UGC. This fits in with the risk-averse nature of newspapers and reflects editors' continuing (see Thurman, 2008) concerns about reputation, trust and legal issues" (p. 354).

DIVERSITY. Both the public journalism and citizen journalism movement have argued that professional news organizations and journalists have become too detached from the audience. It is argued that market dynamics, political influences and all-too-easy reliance on daily routines has resulted in news coverage that is biased towards elite groups or mainstream opinion, while smaller or less influential groups are overlooked (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). In this vein, Kenix (2009) describes the void that blogs can fill: "Blogs can (...) offer a deeper analysis, based upon a diverse range of sources and contributing citizen commentators, which is not possible through modern corporate, mainstream outlets" (p. 791).

Although the possibilities for individuals to publish their own news and opinions through online platforms and forums have vastly expanded, studies examining the composition, dynamics and nature of such discussions are still scarce (e.g., Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Ruiz et al., 2011). While online readers comments could reflect more diversity with regard to tone and range than traditional letters-to-the-editor (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012), Singer (2009) in her examination of online comments

reports various problems with regard to the composition of online debate: “Troubling is that the conversation was characterized by intense interaction only among a vocal few, with minimal participation by most of those who ventured into the discourse” (p. 490).

JOURNALISTIC STYLES AND PRINCIPLES. It is argued that ‘journalism’ performed by ordinary citizens is different from what is known from professional journalism, because the norms, ethics, backgrounds, goals and status are assumed to differ (Woodly, 2008). However, this has not prevented participatory forms of media, such as some political blogs, to become established platforms in the realm of mainstream media (Hindman, 2009; Perlmutter, 2008). It has been argued that the advent of participatory media may lead to new and additional forms of journalism, and that it may even impact the practices of professional journalism. For example, Deuze (2003) argued, following the ideals of public journalism, that technology could lead to *monitorial journalism* (where journalists publish content based on concrete questions and demands from the public) or *dialogical journalism* (in which there is no strict division between journalists and the public and content is produced together).

While there has been quite some inquiry into the emergence of new journalistic routines (e.g., Matheson, 2004; Platon & Deuze, 2002; Siapera, 2008) as well as the impact of professional newsroom cultures (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Nah & Chung, 2009; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Wardle & Williams, 2010; Vujnovic et al., 2010), fundamental changes in this respect have not emerged yet. As Kenix (2009) notes: “There was no evidence in this sample of bloggers establishing a new way of organizing media or sharing meaningful self-disclosure that reported on personal experiences or struggles; no resistance narratives outside of established political norms and practices; no facilitation of democratic participation and cultural disruption” (p. 814).

IMPACT ON POLITICS

PERFORMANCE OF POLITICS. While politicians and governments are primarily held accountable through regular elections, participatory media have made it easier for regular citizens to openly and directly reflect on political actors’ behavior, expose misdemeanors and lies or bring to light other newsworthy information. This can happen both during elections and in non-election periods. For example, in 2002 bloggers were credited with the stepping down

of the American senate majority leader Trent Lott after giving a controversial speech (Davis, 2009). The most illustrative and recent examples of the power of participatory media are of course the political revolutions and protests in North Africa and the Middle East (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Lim, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Increasingly, not only news media but also politicians and political actors use participatory media to tap into public opinion and to consult and interact with the electorate.

PARTICIPATION. Because of the lowered participation thresholds, it was a natural expectation that more people than before would participate in public and political debate. While recent decades have been marked by the general notion that institutional forms of political and civic participation are low and in decline (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Putnam, 2000), it has been noted that the popularity of less traditional forms of participation, such as 'political consumerism' and online protesting, are increasing (Dalton, 2008; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). The unprecedented popularity of Facebook and Twitter (Löf & Seybert, 2010; Madden & Zickuhr, 2011), also for political purposes (Smith & Rainie, 2008), could be seen as a sign that the era in which the public debate was dominated only by a few elitist actors is coming to an end. It is expected that the lowered participation threshold could lead to a more egalitarian political environment, in which previously unheard and marginalized groups can have a say.

Despite the expectations for a reinvigoration of political participation, it has also been found that most people who are politically active online, are the same – or at least share the same sociodemographic and political characteristics – as those who are or were active offline (Dahlberg, 2001; Hindman, 2009; Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). And on an even more critical note, it is feared that the increased possibilities for participation, leads to the fragmentation of the public discourse (Habermas, 2006; Sunstein, 2007; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 2005). The notion that people prefer information that matches or reinforces their own opinions and attitude, is not new (Festinger, 1957; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Sears & Freedman, 1967). However, the numerous participatory media platforms allow citizens even more than ever to seek out information, opinion and news topics that match their preferences and to create so-called echo chambers and information cocoons (Tewksbury & Rittenberger, 2012). Being one of the exponents of the dystopian 'camp', Sunstein (2008) argues: "The construction

of information cocoons and echo chambers is a real problem for a democracy, not least because polarization is inevitable. For many people, blunders and extremism are highly likely, not in spite of the blogosphere but because of it” (p. 95).

Looking back at the consequences that were passed in review, it is clear that an actual proliferation of participatory media and its ‘political use’ by citizens has important ramifications for media and politics, and consequently society. Although the origins and perspectives of these expectations diverge, many seem to share the belief that a large share of previously inactive citizens will seize the opportunity to get involved in contributing journalistic and political information and opinions to participatory media platforms. An empirical test of how many people actually participate, and what kind of content they contribute, lies at the heart of this dissertation. But before sketching the context and outline of this dissertation, a few critical gaps in current research are discussed.

VOIDS IN RESEARCH

Despite the explosive growth of academic attention for the consequences of participatory media, a number of issues limit our current understanding of the extent and the nature of the political uses of participatory media. Below, I list the three main shortcomings.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS. Surveys with a small number of respondents, case studies, and explorative content analyses certainly have a place in academic research as a means to describe upcoming phenomena or complex and abstract processes. However, the abundance of these type of studies, and the scarcity of studies with large-scale, systematic, and representative samples (Neuberger, Nuernbergk & Rischke, 2007), has led many to make generalizations about the influence of participatory media based on inadequate data.

NARROW GEOGRAPHICAL FOCUS. The vast majority of citizen journalism studies originate from the United States. However, there are sufficient indications to expect different findings in other countries. First of all, the American political system and political culture are different from many other countries, including the Netherlands, which translates in differences with regard to voter turnout and levels of political engagement (for an overview, see LeDuc, Niemi, & Norris, 2010), which thus may also lead to differences in how forms on online citizen participation develop. And, related, there are

various differences with regard to culture (Hofstede, 2001), media systems (Curran, Iyengar, Brink Lund, & Salovaara-Moring, 2009; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and political communication systems (Baek, 2009) that account for differences in the development of the online participation of citizens and changes with regard to journalistic and political blog cultures (Hanusch, 2009). Also, the emergence of political blogging has started earlier the United States and the blogosphere may therefore be in a different state than ‘younger’ or developing blogospheres.

POLITICAL CITIZEN JOURNALISM? Many of the expectations regarding online participatory tools concern the *political* use of a *variety* of tools and platforms by *ordinary* citizens. However, the literature reveals that much of the research on participatory media is not concerned with the *political* nature or *political* impact. And, if politics are concerned, many studies are concerned with how news organizations, political actors and a handful of A-list bloggers are employing digital tools instead of examining to which extent *ordinary citizens* are using technology in a political way. Further, although using participatory media includes discussion forums, comments and uploading multimedia, most studies are focused on blogs and social networks.

This dissertation addresses the above-mentioned limitations by examining a *broad variety* of participatory media *outside* the United States (namely, The Netherlands), and used in a *political* context. Further, to increase generalizability, large-scale and nationally representative survey data will be used as well as various sampling steps in the blog content analysis to maximize the representativeness of the sample.

CONTEXT OF THE DISSERTATION: THE DUTCH CASE

It has been observed that most studies have been conducted in the United States. However, also in Europe, including the Netherlands, the emergence of participatory media has not gone unnoticed. Europe, and particularly The Netherlands, lies ahead of the United States in various ways, for example with regard to Internet penetration and broadband access (International Telecommunication Union, 2011). But also with regard to news consumption, both online and offline, and the use of participatory media, the Netherlands is a frontrunner (Newcom, 2012; Seybert, 2011; Trilling & Schoenbach, 2012). Moreover, the political situation in the Netherlands in the last years, which is characterized by polarization and intense immigration debates, helped shape

a culture in which there is much political debate (Boomkens, 2010; Oosterwaal & Torenvlied, 2010). Thus, being a front-runner with regard to Internet penetration and news consumption, combined with the political climate makes the Netherlands an excellent case to examine the development of participatory media in the political realm.

In the last decade, there have been various initiatives by news organizations to let the audience participate in the news process (Van Oers & Pleijter, 2011). Naturally, all news organizations facilitate their audience to leave comments under articles, to participate in forums and to contact the news desk. But there have also been more substantial participatory projects (Skoeps, VKBlogs, Dorpspleinen, NOS Net), and photos and videos of citizens on various occasions have been featured in the news (e.g., Theo van Gogh murder, the plane crash Turkish Airlines near Schiphol, video footage police violence against squatters). Furthermore, during the 2010 elections party leaders took part in public digital debates on Twitter and the (then) largest social network Hyves, the Dutch equivalent of Facebook.

But despite the omnipresence of many years of participatory features and platforms within and outside the Dutch media, even until today there has been a debate about the strained and undefined relationship ‘citizen journalists’ on the one hand and professional journalists and news organizations on the other (e.g., Bardoel, 2010; Costera Meijer & Arendsen, 2010). The – allegedly growing – popularity and prominence of platforms where citizens can anonymously and unfoundedly ventilate their opinions raises concerns amongst public figures and political actors about the quality of both the public sphere and professional journalism (Draijer, 2011; Knapen, 2008; Schnitzler, 2012; SP, 2009; Truijens, 2012). But despite these criticisms, and various failed projects, new initiatives are still employed and various news organizations and scholars see a future for citizen journalism (Van der Valk, 2011; Van Trigt, 2011).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

It is argued that the emergence of participatory media and citizen journalism can have effects on professional journalism, politics and society. But to find out to which extent this is really happening, it is of crucial importance to have a complete or at least broad and objective view of the current situation. It is therefore important to stress that this dissertation is largely exploratory in

nature. The central aim of the study is to examine the breadth and depth of the political uses of participatory media by citizens. It is argued that there is a need for answering basic questions: How many people actually participate, and how often is their participation political in nature? What kind of content do they publish? And why do they publish it? And what are the characteristics of these ‘citizen journalists’? Having answers to such questions would not only help to examine if and how extant communication theories needs updating, but also to what extent the emergence of online participatory media are leading to fundamental changes in the relationships between citizens, media and politics. More specifically, this dissertation thus aims to provide more empirical ground for the persistent debate between supporters of the ‘mobilization thesis’ on the one hand, and the people who believe participatory media will not significantly impact traditional structures (‘normalization thesis’) or even strengthen existing inequalities in terms of participation (‘reinforcement thesis’).

The set-up of the dissertation follows Harold Lasswell’s classic communication model (1948), which describes the central elements of the communication process: who – says what – to whom – in what channel – with what effect? Using two sets of survey data, I aim to shed light on the people who actually produce content (*who*) on participatory platforms such as blogs, Twitter and social networks: how many are they, what are their characteristics, what motivates them? Using content analysis, the content of political weblogs is examined (*says what?*), describing the frequency, form and nature of these publications. Using the survey data, I also asked who (*to whom?*) is using (consuming) the various platforms (*in what channel?*). Finally, this dissertation aims to provide a more systematic and empirical basis to examine the *effects* of participatory media and citizen participation in future research.

In chapter 2 and 3, the results of a large survey (N=2,081), representative of the Dutch population, are presented about the use of participatory media. In chapter 2, both ‘passive’ (i.e., consuming, reading, watching) and ‘active’ (writing, uploading) uses of participatory media are discussed, as well as the differences between political and non-political uses. In chapter 3, the explanatory role of personality traits and traditional political predictors is examined. More specifically, it is examined whether individuals who are more extravert and open to experience, are more likely to make political use of participatory media. Further, the mediating role of online news use, political

talk and political interest and the moderating role of external efficacy are explored.

In order to provide more detail on the actual content that citizens produce, in chapter 4 one specific participatory medium is singled out: blogs. Given the wide variety of multimedia features and publication and discussion options, this medium was viewed as the outlet that would provide the richest information about citizens' participation with regard to journalism and politics. The chapter covers the results of a content analysis of Dutch political citizen blogs that examines blog posts, blog characteristics and information about the bloggers. Further, particular attention is paid to the sampling of blogs: employing multiple steps, search engines, and keywords, it was the aim to compose a sample that goes beyond a handful of well-known and popular political blogs. Chapter 5 follows up on the content analysis of the previous chapter and examines the producers of political blogs. Based on extant findings combined with the insights from the other studies, a survey was conducted to ask political bloggers about their blogging behavior and perceptions. More specifically, bloggers are asked about their role perceptions, the reasons to blog and the perceived effectiveness of their outlets. Chapter 6, the last chapter, provides a concise overview of the main results and the implications of the dissertation.

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Chapter 2

The people still known as the audience: The limited political use of online participatory media^{*}

^{*} An earlier version of this chapter has been submitted for publication and is currently being revised (R&R).

The growing pervasiveness of the Internet has led to a renewed scholarly interest in the intricate relationships between citizens, the media and politics. Whereas the domain of political debate in the pre-Internet era was mainly reserved for the political elite and mainstream news organizations (see Gans, 2003; Graber, McQuail, & Norris, 1998), new technologies have made it possible for virtually everybody to effortlessly share and discuss all sorts of information by means of interactive and participatory media such as discussion forums, commentary options, social network sites, Twitter and blogs. Of course, similar hopes and fears about the democratizing power of new media have been expressed with the introduction of previously new media – such as the newspaper, radio, television and the VCR (for an overview, see Schoenbach, 2001). And indeed, these media have certainly led to a process of democratization and wider access for citizens to the public sphere, which was traditionally only accessible for the elites. But the inherently interactive and participatory nature of the Internet seemed to provide citizens with even more accessible and appropriate tools to publicly express themselves.

For centuries, traditional mass media have played a pivotal role with regard to this relationship by facilitating platforms, disseminating and amplifying information and confronting politics with important issues expressed by the public (Gans, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). Given the centrality of professional news organizations in democratic theories (see e.g., Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2009; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956; Strömbäck, 2005), the increased prominence of citizen participation in the news has led scholars to critically reassess the role of the news media as dominant gatekeepers, interpreters and disseminators of information.

Despite the diverging accounts on the changes for democracy (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001; 2007; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003), most authors seem to share the contention that, in the Internet age, the active participation of citizens in democracy has moved to the fore. Mainstream news media are said to no longer be the sole platforms for deliberation and news dissemination (Benkler, 2006; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Kline & Burnstein, 2005). The public sphere as described by Habermas (1962) had been criticized for being elitist and inaccessible for most, but such structural barriers seem to be virtually non-existent on the Internet. It was therefore argued that journalism would change from mere central top-down

communication into a 'conversation' or a 'dialogue' (Deuze, 2004; Jarvis, 2006; Soffer, 2009). Rosen (2006) typified this alleged shift of power by proposing to view today's news audience as 'The People Formerly Known as the Audience'. Gillmor (2004) even saw passive news consumers becoming "a key source of news for others" (p. 137). Despite the potential of citizens' contributions, the actual benefits have been disputed. Deterioration of professional journalistic norms and practices, such as fact checking or being accountable, could harm the public's trust and potentially the health of a democracy (e.g., Keen, 2007; Sunstein, 2007).

Considering the possibilities of a more deliberative democracy, how is the public sphere taking form on the Web and to what extent do rational, open and equal discussions and public reasoning take place on the Internet (Carty, 2010; Graham, 2009; Hess, 2009)? Also the potential of citizens who produce their own journalistic content – commonly referred to as citizen journalism – has been explored (Gillmor, 2004). Much attention in this respect has been paid to the developments of the American political blogosphere (Hindman, 2009; Perlmutter, 2008).

The increased focus on citizens' participation on the Web is of course plausible, considering not only blogs and social media but also the many news organizations that are explicitly calling upon their audience to post commentary and submit newsworthy articles, photos and videos to the newsroom. However, the actual degree of participation on the Internet is unknown, as is the extent to which previously inactive citizens are now expressing themselves. The notion that as a result of the introduction of the participatory media the public sphere is undergoing fundamental changes, have mainly based themselves on the premise that new technologies have increased the *accessibility* of the public sphere. However, it has been put into question whether technology in itself is able to create an online sphere that is radically different – thus unbound and more inclusive – from the public sphere as it was hitherto conceived (Brundidge, 2010; Gripsrud, 2009). Trenz (2009) in this respect wonders: "Can the digital era defreeze the representative institutions of the national public sphere and thus carry on the unlimited force of publicity that was first discovered by the reading publics two centuries ago?" (p. 34).

It is not known how widespread and representative the use of participatory media is. Moreover, despite the inherently participatory nature of online platforms, it is not known how often citizens' online behavior is really

political in nature. Drawing on recent and original Dutch survey data from a nationally representative sample (N=2,081), we examine the use and users of a wide variety of participatory media (blogs, Twitter, social networks, user-generated content, comments and discussion forums), distinguishing not only between merely 'consuming' and actually 'contributing' content, but also between political and non-political uses.¹

PARTICIPATORY MEDIA: WHAT DO WE KNOW SO FAR?

In order to shed light on existing relevant studies, we provide a review of studies on the political use of participatory media: user-generated content, blogs, online commentary (comments, forums) and social networks.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC). A number of studies have focused on the integration of user-generated content in newsrooms (e.g., Domingo, Quandt, Heinonen, Paulussen, Singer, & Vujnovic, 2008; Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger, 2007; Thurman, 2008) and the attitudes of journalists towards citizens' contributions (Nah & Chung, 2009; Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010; Vujnovic et al., 2010; Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2010). As some content analyses of UGC suggest (e.g., Örnebring, 2008; Pantti & Bakker, 2009), many contributions are related to accidents, weather conditions or entertainment. However, systematic enquiry into the characteristics of the people that engage in submitting UGC in the context of news or politics is largely absent.

BLOGS. Particularly in the US, blogging in the realm of news and politics has become an important and accepted phenomenon in the public debate (Hindman, 2009; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Perlmutter, 2008), especially after the 2004 presidential elections (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005). The amount of blogs has grown dramatically over the last years, with blog search engine Technorati tracking more than 100 million blogs in 2008 (Technorati, 2008) and The Nielsen Company reporting 167 million blogs mid 2011 on their website BlogPulse (www.blogpulse.com). However, it remains largely unknown how many of all personal blogs on the Internet also discuss political issues. A survey among bloggers from Pew by Lenhart and Fox (2006) revealed that only 11% of their sample indicated that 'issues of public life' were the primary subject of their blog. The bulk of blog content analyses suggests that blogs primarily deal with personal or non-political affairs (Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2007; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Papacharissi, 2007; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, & Sapp, 2006).

Furthermore, survey and content analysis data show that the few truly 'political' bloggers in most Western democracies share the same characteristics: male, white, wealthy and well educated (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009; Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, & Jeong, 2006).

DISCUSSION FORUMS AND COMMENTS. Several in-depth case studies have found promising results regarding the use of forums for political deliberation (Graham, 2009), others arrived at less positive findings in terms of participation and diversity (e.g., Witschge, 2007). Despite the various case studies (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Hujanen & Pietikäinen, 2004; Singer, 2009), representative and individual level data about the use of forums and commentary sections are largely missing.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND TWITTER. In recent years, much attention has been given to the emergence of social network sites (SNS). Almost three quarters of online teens and young adults in the US are members of SNS (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). In the UK almost half of the population has updated or created an account (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009), and in the Netherlands 89% indicated to have a social networking profile somewhere (Multiscope, 2010).

Smith and Rainie (2008) reported that more than a quarter of people under 30 years obtained campaign information about the 2008 U.S. elections from network sites such as MySpace and Facebook, while this was true for only 4% of the people in their thirties, and 1% in their forties. Despite the increasing number of studies that demonstrate the popularity of social networks, there has been little focus as to what extent people actively contribute to these networks (posting (political) messages, joining (political) fan groups or using widgets and gadgets).

Twitter – as a social microblog network – on several occasions has been used for publishing breaking news (Hermida, 2010), and its popularity is still growing (Arceneaux & Schmitz Weiss, 2010; Fox, Zickuhr, & Smith, 2009; Nielsen, 2010). A Pew report by Smith (2011) showed that 22% of Americans used Twitter in relation to the 2008 presidential campaign and elections. Hitherto – as far as we know – representative data about the use of Twitter is missing.

GAPS, SHORTCOMINGS AND QUESTIONS

In sum, not much systematic data is available about the *political* uses of participatory media. Also, many studies fail to distinguish between passive uses of participatory media (reading, joining, watching) and active ones (writing, publishing, commenting).

Further, we also do not know *who* it actually is that participates, as relatively little research has examined which individual characteristics are able to predict the political use of participatory media. Scholarly work on the determinants of more traditional forms of political participation offers some useful and plausible suggestions in this respect (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009). Common predictors of participation are political talk (Kim et al., 1999; McLeod et al., 1999; Zhang et al., 2010), political interest (Xenos & Moy, 2007), feelings of political cynicism and efficacy (Blais & St-Vincent, 2010; Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2004), news consumption (McLeod et al., 1999; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003) and sociodemographic characteristics (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Further, Internet skills are important predictors for online forms of political participation (Best & Krueger, 2005; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Krueger, 2002).

An additional shortcoming is that many studies suffer from methodological limitations: Either the research designs (case studies or a small number of interviews) or the sample compositions (nonrepresentative convenience samples or specific groups) do not allow for generalizations to larger populations. Further, most studies have only focused on specific channels instead of providing a more general and comprehensive overview of people's use of participatory media. Our study will address these shortcomings. In this way, it aims to provide a more complete and representative view of citizens' political use of participatory media. Our study is guided by the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: How large is the share of the population that uses participatory media at all?

RQ2: Which participatory media are used how frequently and intensively?

RQ3: How are sociodemographic characteristics and attitudes and behavior with regard to news media and politics related to using participatory media?

RQ4: What are the reasons for people not to contribute content to participatory media?

METHOD

For this paper, a representative survey (N=2,130) was conducted in December 2009 in The Netherlands. This country is a relevant environment for this study, given the high Internet penetration in (more than 90%, CBS, 2010) and heavy attention for participatory media in mainstream news coverage. Also, the Dutch situation seems comparable to the broader – European – situation, given the high popularity of social media in most of the 27 European member states (Eurostat, 2010). Our sample was representative of the Dutch population aged 13 years and older and was conducted using an online survey (CAWI). The survey was administered by research company TNS NIPO, which maintains a panel of more than 230,000 respondents that is representative of the Dutch population². Recruitment is done both offline and online. The response rate was 73% (AAPOR RR1) and average completion time 20 minutes. Results and feedback from a pre-test (n=74) were used to improve the quality of the survey. After 49 cases were removed because of invalid survey responses, 2,081 cases remained in the final dataset.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE USE OF PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

Respondents were asked about their use of a wide range of participatory media: blogs, Twitter, discussion forums, social networks and comment sections of blogs and news sites. They were also asked how often they sent suggestions, reactions and tips to bloggers or news organizations and if they uploaded photos and videos to the Web. For each activity, respondents were asked whether they only 'consumed' (reading blogs, following forum discussions et cetera), or if they also 'contributed' (writing blog posts, participating in forum discussions et cetera). Also, for both consuming and contributing, 'general' questions were posed (e.g., "How often do you read blogs?") and 'political' questions (e.g., "How often do you read blogs about politics?"). With each 'political question', the definition of political issues was shown below every question: "*Political issues* refers to topics where politicians or political parties are involved, or where political policy and legislation are mentioned. These issues may involve local, domestic or international politics and can relate to a wide variety of fields, such as health care, defense, immigration, elections, security, education, culture, traffic, real

estate and housing, tax issues et cetera”. For each activity, respondents could indicate the following frequencies: never, once per year, a few times per year, around once per month; few times per month; once a week; a few times per week; every day. In total, this resulted in 24 questions, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Questions about the use of participatory media

	Consuming		Contributing	
	General	Political	General	Political
<i>Comments</i>	Read	Read	Write	Write
<i>Discussion forums</i>	Read/follow	Read/follow	Participate	Participate
<i>Social networks</i>	Read/follow activity	Read/follow activity	Participate	Participate
<i>Blogs</i>	Read	Read	Write own blog	Write own blog
<i>Blogs (group blog)</i>	(not applicable)	(not applicable)	Contribute to group blog	Contribute to group blog
<i>Twitter</i>	Read	Read	Write	Write
<i>Uploading photo/video</i>	(not applicable)	(not applicable)	Upload	Upload

Further, anticipating on possible low participation rates (with regard to current affairs and politics), we tapped into respondents’ reasons for not actively contributing content to participatory media. Respondents were presented with a battery of possible reasons (11-point scale) and asked to what extent these were actually reasons for them not to contribute. The listed reasons were: I am concerned about my privacy; Most contributions and discussions do not lead to anything; I rather express myself differently; It costs too much time and energy; I find the discussions uncivil; I find it unnecessary that the public participates; I do not know how these things work. There was also an option to write down one’s own reasons.

EXPLANATORY VARIABLES

For all respondents, gender (1=male, 49%=male), age ($M = 44,92$, $SD = 18.39$), education (low/high) were recorded. A wide variety of additional characteristics were measured that could potentially underlie participation. We gauged their news use (newspapers, television and online), media cynicism, Internet skills, political cynicism, internal efficacy, external efficacy, political interest, political talk, political orientation and their voting frequency. The full question wording of all the items, the means, the standard deviations and the reliability scores can be found in the Appendix.

RESULTS

Blogs, forums, comments and social networks are *consumed* at least once per month by a fair share of the respondents, ranging between 22 and 36%. Twitter is as low as 6%. But consumption of participatory media specifically for *political* information is considerably lower, with all percentages below ten. The only exception is reading comments: 19% reads politically related comments at least once per month (Table 2).

Table 2 Consuming participatory media

Activity	Consuming general		Consuming political	
	≥ Once per month	≥ Once per week	≥ Once per month	≥ Once per week
Comments	36 ^a	21	19	9
Forums	22	11	10	3
Social networks	34	21	6	2,3
Blogs	27	10	4	1,3
Twitter	6	3	1,7	1,1

Note. N=2,081. Cell entries are percentages of total sample.

^a Percentages below 3% are reported to one decimal place for reasons of clarity

Actually participating in social networks (32%), or uploading photos and videos (18%) and writing comments (11%) are among the most popular

activities. However, these activities are only rarely related to politics. For example, a small percentage of the respondents (0.6%) tweets about politics at least monthly, and only a few (2.7%) engage in politically related activities on social networks at least once per month (Table 3).

Table 3 Contributing to participatory media

Activity	Contributing general		Contributing political	
	≥ Once per month	≥ Once per week	≥ Once per month	≥ Once per week
Comments	11 ^a	4	3	1.1
Social networks	32	20	2.7	1.1
Forums	10	5	2.4	0.7
Uploading photo/video	18	4	0.6	0.1
Twitter	3	1.6	0.6	0.5
Blog (own)	5	1.9	0.6	0.2
Blog (group)	1.0	0.3	0.3	0.1

Note. N=2,081. Cell entries are percentages of the total sample.

^a Percentages below 3% are reported to one decimal place for reasons of clarity

Even if we add up the number of activities per respondent, we find that the majority of the population does not consume political content on the Internet nor contributes content (Table 4). Moreover, within the group of the at least marginally involved people, the majority consumes rather than contributes content to participatory media. When it comes to political topics, 94% indicates that they never or hardly ever (at most a few times per year) contribute content to any participatory medium. Even merely consuming participatory media is not that popular: 76% never or hardly ever reads political content on blogs, tweets, comment sections, forum discussions or social networks.

Table 4 Number of activities citizens participate in at least monthly

No. of activities	Consuming		Contributing	
	General	Political	General	Political
0	42.2	76.3	59.2	94.2
1	21.8	13.0	19.0	3.1
2	16.1	6.4	12.7	1.6
3	10.9	2.5	4.6	0.7
4	6.8	1.5	2.7	0.2
5	2.3	0.4	1.2	0.0
6			0.4	0,1
7			0.1	0.1

Note. N=2,081. Cell entries are percentages of the total sample. The maximum of consumption acts is 5.

To investigate the characteristics of users of participatory media vis-à-vis the people who do not use them, respondents were classified as being *inactive* (never or less than once per month consuming political content on any of the participatory media), as *consumer* (consuming political content on any of the participatory media at least once per month, but not contributing content) or as *contributor* (contributing political content least once per month to any of the participatory media). One-way ANOVAs (with Tukey-Kramer post-hoc comparisons) were performed to determine whether there were significant differences between the groups.

Individuals who use participatory media are more often younger, male, and highly educated (Table 5). They are avid news consumers, talk more about politics, vote more often, have more self-confidence with regard to their political competence and possess better Internet skills compared to people who do not use participatory media. However, active users do not seem to be more cynical about media or politics, and they also do not differ with regard to their political orientation.

Table 5 Background characteristics per user type

		Inactives (n=1583)	Consumers (n=376)	Contributors (n=121)
	Range	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
<i>Sociodemographics</i>				
Age	>16	45.44 (18.90) _a	46.21 (16.81) _a	38.01 (14.80) _b
Gender (0=female)	0-1	0.48 (0.50) _a	0.48 (0.50) _a	0.59 (0.49) _b
Education	0-1	0.31 (0.46) _a	0.47 (0.50) _b	0.48 (0.50) _b
<i>Media variables</i>				
Newspaper use	0-7	2.98 (2.87)	3.20 (2.84)	3.28 (2.51)
Television news	0-7	3.92 (2.58) _a	4.65 (2.27) _b	4.44 (2.34) _b
Online news	0-7	2.05 (2.57) _a	4.53 (2.58) _b	4.82 (2.38) _b
Media cynicism	0-7	4.52 (1.23)	4.68 (1.16)	4.59 (1.23)
Internet skills	1-7	5.05 (1.56) _a	5.72 (1.19) _b	6.04 (1.03) _c
<i>Political variables</i>				
Internal efficacy	1-7	2.89 (1.32) _a	3.53 (1.33) _b	4.04 (1.27) _c
External efficacy	1-7	3.11 (1.49)	3.20 (1.43)	3.25 (1.41)
Political interest	1-7	3.36 (1.73) _a	4.40 (1.58) _b	4.78 (1.52) _c
Political talk	0-7	1.01 (1.41) _a	2.05 (1.78) _b	2.38 (1.87) _c
Political orientat.	1-11	5.92 (2.15)	5.83 (2.46)	5.93 (2.32)
Political cynicism	1-7	4.23 (1.30)	4.18 (1.20)	4.18 (1.32)
Voting frequency ^a	1-4	3.24 (1.03) _a	3.55 (0.73) _b	3.53 (0.83) _b

Note. Significant differences (.05) between the means of the user types are denoted with subscripts. If no subscripts are present, this means there are no significant differences.

^aThe sample sizes for this variable are somewhat lower (1474, 363 and 115 respectively) because respondents who were not (yet) allowed to vote were excluded.

To examine which characteristics were most important when all the other factors were controlled for binary logistic regression analyses³ were performed, using all individual characteristics as predictor variables (Table 6). We can see that, then, online news use, Internet skills, political interest and

political talk remain significant positive predictors of participatory media use. Further, media cynicism positively predicts consuming participatory media, while internal efficacy positively predicts contributing.⁴

Table 6 Logistic regression of political uses of participatory media

	Consuming		Contributing	
	B (S.E.)	Exp(B)	B (S.E.)	Exp(B)
Age	.00 (0.01)	1	-.04 (0.01) ***	0.96
Gender (0=fem.)	-.55 (0.14) ***	0.58	-.09 (0.24)	0.91
Education	-.01 (0.15)	0.99	-.56 (0.25) *	0.57
Newspaper use	-.05 (0.03)	0.95	.01 (0.05)	1.01
Television news	.01 (0.03)	1.01	.03 (0.05)	1.03
Online news	.30 (0.03) ***	1.35	.32 (0.04) ***	1.38
Media cynicism	.14 (0.06) *	1.15	.07 (0.09)	1.08
Internet skills	.27 (0.06) ***	1.31	.30 (0.11) **	1.35
Internal efficacy	.03 (0.06)	1.03	.23 (0.10) *	1.26
External efficacy	-.04 (0.05)	0.96	-.05 (0.09)	0.95
Political interest	.24 (0.06) ***	1.27	.41 (0.10) ***	1.51
Political talk	.26 (0.05) ***	1.29	.27 (0.07) ***	1.31
Political orientation	-.01 (0.03)	0.99	-.02 (0.05)	0.98
Political cynicism	-.02 (0.06)	0.98	-.01 (0.10)	0.99
Voting frequency	.01 (0.09)	1.01	-.07 (0.15)	0.93
Constant	-5.54 (0.7) ***	0	-6.12 (1.17) ***	0
Ps. R ² (Nagelk.)	.300		.361	

Note. n=1,844 for consuming and n=1,586 for contributing. The sample sizes are smaller than the original 2,081 because education data is missing for some respondents and the question about voting frequency did not apply to all respondents. Further, for the analysis of consumers, the contributors were excluded (and vice versa). The coefficients in the B-column are unstandardized b-coefficients

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

What are the reasons people themselves name for *not* contributing content (in relation to news or politics) to participatory media? To demonstrate the

relative importance people ascribed to the reasons they were presented with, we use the average deviations from the mean of all reasons asked about⁵. Regardless of age, gender or education, we find that the number-one reason for people not to contribute content to participatory media is fear of privacy (Table 7). Also, the abstainers think that their contributions do not have any effect. Further, a major reason for consumers – people who only passively use participatory media – is that they find the discussions uncivil. Contrary to what is often thought, a perceived lack of technical understanding is not an important reason of non-participation.

Table 7 Reasons for not contributing content to participatory media

<i>Reason</i>	Inactives		Consumers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
I am concerned about my privacy	.93	1.92	.78	1.64
Most contributions and discussions do not lead to anything	.23	1.25	.47	1.37
I rather express myself differently	.23	1.43	.18	1.33
It costs too much time and energy	.20	1.29	.06	1.47
I find discussions uncivil	-.16	1.28	.43	1.46
I find it unnecessary that the public participates	-.45	1.28	-.42	1.41
I do not know how these things work	-.98	1.69	-1.50	1.80

Note. Respondents who contribute content to participatory media are excluded from the analysis. Figures are deviations from the individual means. The original questions were measured with an 11-point scale.

SUMMARY

The rapid expansion of new media technologies such as Twitter, blogs and social networks have led many to hopes for more participation in public discourse. The driving force behind this development was supposed to be 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006), who would increasingly use 'lean forward' instead of 'lean backward' media. Our findings

however support Hindman (2009), who notes: “Too often, normative debates about the Internet have gotten ahead of the evidence” (p. 18).

Our study looked at the whole variety of participatory media, has differentiated between merely consuming and actually contributing content and used a representative and large-scale survey. The data show that only a small minority of the Dutch population – around 6% – at least once in a while actively contributes to political discussions or contributes political content to forums, Twitter conversations, weblogs, social networks or comment sections. And these people seem to be the ‘usual suspects’: they belong to the group that also talks more about news and politics, shows more interest, feels more efficacious, consumes more news and scores higher on Internet skills. They are also more often male and are highly educated.

With regard to age, it appears that contributors seem somewhat younger. Or, when looking at the distribution of respondents over different age groups, at least older people are not significantly overrepresented. This is different from what is usually found in studies on traditional forms of political participation, which usually show that younger people are less involved in politics (Delli Carpini, 2000; Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2003; O’Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, & McDonagh, 2003). This finding could suggest that the interactive nature of online participatory media may appeal more to younger generations than conventional forms of participation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study once again shows that technological determinism is not strong – to say the least. It supports the notion that Internet access does not equal participation, certainly not in a political context, therewith shattering the hopes of people who predicted a radical democratization as a result of Internet technology. Our data rather provides support for the conclusion by Williams et al. (2010), who noted that: “[O]verwhelmingly, journalists have remained journalists and audiences are still audiences” (p. 12). The imbalance between passive and active audience is in line with the patterns of low participation on other areas on the web, such as education environments (Kahnwald, 2007) and health support groups (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000).

An important aspect of this study is the cultural and political setting in which online representation and participation takes place. We note that our conclusions with regard to the limited participation of citizens cannot simply

be generalized to other parts of the world. While the widespread attention and substantial usage figures – even for political information (Smith, 2011) – in the United States suggest that social media are playing a prominent role in the political and public sphere, we found no such pattern in our study. Recent data has already shown substantial differences in popularity of participatory media along cultural lines (Kelly & Etling, 2008; Loewenstein, 2008). But there may be other important factors that may help to explain cross-national differences. A crucial factor for example emerged from an international report with survey data from 46 countries (TNS, 2010), which showed that in countries with low levels of press freedom, participation in online social networks was relatively high (Malaysia, Russia and Turkey ranked as the top three, The Netherlands was number 41). Other factors may be differences in campaign styles (Karlsen, 2010; Plasser & Plasser, 2002), in media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and in trust in mainstream media (Gallup, 2004; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). Given the important differences between the United States and Europe, it is necessary to consider these factors in future studies. Further, our data should also be compared to participation rates during election times.

It of course remains the question what the quality and the effects are of the contributions by that small percentage of active citizens. How much value for journalism and democracy does joining Obama's Facebook group or leaving two comments per month under a news article have? If people indicate to be very active political users of Twitter and forums, then what is the nature of the contributions they make? To what extent do these people really engage in forms of public deliberation as envisioned by Habermasian public sphere thinkers?

We therefore would argue that it is relevant to examine into greater detail the 6% of 'active' people. Zooming in on this relatively small group of people could be of great importance, given the potential influence of even relatively few people. As Eveland, Hutchens and Morey (2011) suggest, despite the low number of people who are active, such 'political network hubs' can play crucial roles as connectors to others. They argue that "individuals who are hubs likely have a crucial mix of strong ties and weak ties. This mix makes network hubs the glue that ties the broader political network together" (p. 24).

Our findings regarding people's reasons *not* to contribute to participatory media provide some insight into the future development of participatory media and citizen participation. Given the high importance for privacy concerns,

uncivil discussions and the ineffectiveness of participation, it remains to be seen whether technological advancements are able to clear away such obstacles or whether future generations are viewing those issues as less of a problem.

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APPENDIX

News consumption (0-7 days)

How many days in a regular week (Monday until Sunday) do you read a printed newspaper? ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 2.85$),

How many days in a regular week (Monday until Sunday) do you watch news or current affairs programs on television? ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 2.53$)

How many days in a regular week (Monday until Sunday) do you read or watch news on the Internet? ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 2.78$)

Media cynicism (1-7, completely disagree – completely agree; $\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.22$)

The media in my country are...

...honest

...working accurately

...nonpartisan

...complete in their reporting

...trustworthy

Internet skills

How competent do you consider yourself in terms of working with the Internet? (1-7, not competent at all – very competent; $M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.51$)

Internal efficacy (1-7, completely disagree – completely agree; ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.36$)

I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics

I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country

I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.

I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as current politicians.

External efficacy (1-7, completely disagree – completely agree; $\alpha = .78$, $M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.47$)

People like me don't have any say about what government does [reverse coded]

I don't think public officials care much what people like me think [reverse coded]

Parties are only interested in people's votes but not in their opinions. [reverse coded]

Political interest (1-7, not interested at all – very interested; $M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.76$)

Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?

Political talk (0-7 days; $M = 1.28$, $SD = 1.58$)

How many days in a regular week (Monday until Sunday) do you talk about politics with others?

Political orientation (1-11, left-right; $M = 5.90$, $SD = 2.22$)

When political orientation is concerned one often speaks of 'left' and 'right'. Could you please indicate on the scale below where you would position yourself?

Political cynicism (1-7, completely disagree – completely agree; $\alpha = .70$, $M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.28$)

Generally speaking, I am satisfied with the ways politics works in my municipality

Regardless of the current government, generally speaking I am satisfied with the ways democracy functions in the Netherlands.

Voting frequency (1-4, (almost) never-sometimes-most of the times-always; $M = 3.32$, $SD = .98$)

Out of all the local and national elections for which you were allowed to vote, how often did you actually cast a vote?

NOTES

¹ To avoid using a too narrow definition of politics, we deliberately included a wide variety of dimensions. Our definition of 'political', as used in our survey and shown to the respondents, reads as follows: "With political we are referring to themes or issues in which politicians or political parties are involved or in which political policy issues or decisions are involved. These issues may be local, national or international in nature and may involve any political topic, such as health care, defense, immigration, voting, social welfare, education, culture, traffic, housing, taxes etc."

² Weights were applied to ensure national representativeness regarding gender, age, education, social class, household size and geographical region.

³ The original dependent variables were measured on an ordinal 8-point scale, ranging from never to (almost) every day. However, due to the highly skewed distribution and the excessive amount of non-participants ("never"), the variable was recoded to a binary variable.

⁴ The direction of the two significant effects for gender and education seem somewhat counter-intuitive. However, this is most likely the result of the multiple independent variables that is being controlled for combined with the fact that both variables correlate significantly and strongly with most of these variables.

⁵ By using the average deviations from the individual means, the relative importance people ascribe to the reasons becomes clearer. Also, it takes away the problem that individuals may interpret answer scales like these (not important-important) differently. In this way, for example, individuals that give a score of '3' to privacy considerations while giving all other reasons a '2', they yield the same score (thus, the relative importance) as people who give a score of '5' to privacy consideration while giving a '4' to all other reasons.

Chapter 3

Predicting participation: Personality,
political attitudes and the use of
participatory media

The ubiquitousness and popularity of participatory media like blogs, Twitter and social networks have led many to declare the age of ‘citizen participation’ (e.g., Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2008), with mainstream media losing their central role as a public platform for political information and discussion (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003). Although the previous chapter has demonstrated that there is only a small percentage of the audience that actually uses participatory media for political purposes, news media (Domingo et al., 2008, Thurman, 2008) and political actors (Francoli & Ward, 2008; Meraz, 2007) are increasingly using participatory media to consult and inform their target groups (voters, readers, eyewitnesses et cetera). These – seemingly contrasting – observations make it particularly relevant to study the small group of ‘political’ users in greater detail. In this study their personal characteristics are central and we ask how these are related to the use of participatory media.

This chapter explores a number of hypotheses based on theories and findings from political science and neighboring disciplines, aiming at shedding light on the individual characteristics that help explain the political uses of participatory media such as Twitter, social networks and weblogs. More specifically, we examine if the trait characteristics extraversion and openness to experience are – in tandem with more conventional predictors – significant predictors of participatory media use. We hereby draw on the nascent literature that has demonstrated that individual personality traits can play a significant role in guiding politically related attitudes and behavior (Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010; Orchard & Fullwood, 2010). We argue that the driving individual factors behind participatory behavior merits closer examination, given the notions that traditional forms of participation are in decline while online participatory platforms could serve as attractive alternatives (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Besides the role of personality, we take into account the role of political interest, talk and online news consumption by testing the ‘mediation hypothesis’ (Blais & St. Vincent, 2011; Gallego & Oberski, 2012), which proposes that the effects of personality on participatory behavior are mediated by conventional ‘political predictors’.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

It has been hoped that with the emergence of participatory media a more egalitarian and accessible information and discussion space has surfaced online, which more closely resembles the original discursive arenas that have been described in Habermas' work (1962) on the public sphere (e.g., Benkler, 2006). Here, citizens were able to engage in rational and open discussion without intervention from the state or other power holders. But while participatory media could indeed mobilize and enable citizens from more diverse backgrounds to participate (also referred to as the 'mobilization thesis'), others suggest that existing inequalities in participation rates persist and even become more pronounced (the 'reinforcement thesis'), possibly leading to 'cyberbalkanization', online 'echo chambers', and a decrease of social capital (e.g., Keen, 2012; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2007; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 2005).

The lack of clarity can partly be attributed to the fact that there is, to begin with, little conceptual and methodological agreement over what 'using participatory media' entails. Most notably, often no distinction is made between 'passive' participatory media use, such as *readings* blogs, tweets or discussions, and *actively contributing* to such platforms (e.g., Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, & Ponder, 2010; Kaufhold, Valenzuela, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010). For example, Hanson et al. (2010) acknowledge in their conclusion that their study "did not differentiate between those who create media content in the social networking environments and those who merely read or watch the content posted by others" (p. 602). Although both activities can be considered forms of engagement, conceptually they are different: while the first 'only' requires passive behavior such as clicking, reading and watching, the latter involves more cognitive and creative effort and resources, actually creating or contributing content.¹ That the two activities are not the same also became apparent from the previous chapter, which revealed significant differences between the participation rates. In this study, we distinguish between more passive uses of participatory media (e.g., reading political tweets, following political blogs) and active uses (e.g., posting political tweets, publishing political blog posts).

EXPLANATIONS OF PARTICIPATORY BEHAVIOR

In recent years, both scholars and political actors have focused on the increasing use and presence of participatory media in the political domain. At the same time, there is a growing interest among political communication scholars in what the relationships are between individual psychological characteristics and specific forms of political behavior.

PERSONALITY TRAITS. After a long wave of dominance of rational choice and cognitive processing in political communication, the study of personality came back into fashion in the nineties of the last century (Kinder, 1994). It was found that personality traits have a genetic basis and are thus heritable (Van Gestel & Van Broeckhoven, 2003), and that they can explain variance in attitudes, opinions, and behavior used across various disciplines. Following improvements with regard to adequately, but also parsimoniously measuring personality, evidence has accumulated demonstrating that an individual's personality – “a disposition to react in certain ways” (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011, p. 414) – affects various forms of politically related behavior (Blais & St-Vincent, 2011; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, Raso et al., 2011; Mondak & Halperin, 2008). The ‘Big-Five’ (also: the ‘Five-Factor Model’) is one of the most established and comprehensive frameworks in scholarly research and provides a view on the composition of individuals’ personality (Goldberg, 1990; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992). The Big Five taps into the following basic individual traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience.

Although the traits have been used to explain behavior and attitudes across disciplines (e.g., Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Paunonen & Ashton, 2001), it is important to note that whether or not a certain trait corresponds with certain behavior depends on the nature of the activity involved. Accordingly, Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, Raso et al. (2011) note: “Big Five traits shape the attractiveness of different forms of stimuli. Determining exactly what sort of stimuli political participation constitutes is therefore a necessary step in forming expectations about the relationship between personality and those activities” (p. 695). With regard to form of political behavior, the most solid theoretical foundations and consistent findings have been reported with regard to extraversion and openness to experience.

Extraversion. People with higher levels of extraversion have been characterized as being sociable, energetic, assertive, lively, talkative, outgoing and active (McCrae & John, 1992). Also, extraverts are said to have

a preference for companionship and social stimulation, leading to more social skills, friendships and memberships in clubs (McCrae & Costa, 2008). Plausibly, Mondak and Halperin (2008) hypothesized and demonstrated that extraversion is related to group-based or 'social' forms of political participation, such as attending rallies, speaking at political meetings and contacting politicians and media (see also Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, Raso et al., 2011; Mondak et al., 2010). For less social forms of participation such as voting, also a significant positive relationship was found (Matilla et al., 2011), but not always (Mondak & Halperin, 2008). In our context, extraversion has been linked with higher levels of social media use (Aharony, 2009; Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010; Glynn, Huges, & Hoffman, 2012; Ross et al., 2009; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

Given the proposition that extraversion is related with social media use as well as traditional forms of political participation, we expect that extraversion should be related with political activities on participatory media, such as posting political messages on Facebook walls or engaging in online discussions on forums and news sites. Although there is less theoretical basis to expect extraversion to be related to participatory media use in which no actual interpersonal interaction takes place (reading forums, blogs, wall posts et cetera), we still expect a relationship given the notion that these activities still take place in more or less 'social' environments: platforms such as forums, social networks and Twitter are inherently social in nature and solely exist as a result of the contributions and interactions of its users. Consequently, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Extraversion and political uses of participatory media are positively related.

Openness to experience. Similar to extraversion², openness to experience has been linked with various participatory and socially orientated behaviors. "Open individuals express their creativity, intellectual curiosity, and need for variety in characteristic ways across a variety of mediums. They are verbally fluent, humorous, and expressive in interpersonal interactions" (McCrae & Sutin, 2009, p. 259). Not only seem 'open' people more likely to visit restaurants, bars and coffee shops, to be more curious and to have a wide range of interests (Mehl, Gossling, & Pennebaker, 2006) and to engage in various cultural behaviors (Kraaykamp & Van Eijck, 2005). They also tend to have preferences with regard to political behavior and social media use. Also

positive relationships with social media use (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010) and forms of political participation have been found (Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009).

In light of these recent findings, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: Openness to experience and the political use of participatory media are positively related.

AN INDIRECT RELATIONSHIP? There are good reasons to assume that personality does not only exert direct effects on participatory behavior. Plausibly, because of their general nature, personality traits increase the chance that individuals acquire certain political habits and attitudes, which in turn impact political behavior (Blais & St.-Vincent, 2011). Examining this ‘mediation hypothesis’, Gallego and Oberski (2012) found that the relationship between extraversion and political protest activities was mediated both by political discussion and efficacy (for similar findings, see Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). Combining our expectations regarding extraversion and openness with the notion that there are both direct and indirect effects, we below discuss the three most central mediating factors of our study.

Political interest. It has been found that extraversion and openness to experience are linked with higher levels of political interest (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2011; Mondak & Halperin, 2008). These relationships were expected based on the notion that extravert and open people tend to have a curious and active nature, have a preference for social contacts and have a wide range of interests, characteristics that make them more likely to be drawn to politics. People with higher levels of political interest, on their turn, have consistently been found to show higher levels of civic and political engagement and participation (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Vedlitz, 1980).

Political talk. Following the notions that open people are more verbally fluent, enjoy social environments and that extraverts are assertive, talkative and outgoing, it has been found both traits are positively related with political discussion (Mondak & Halperin, 2008). At the same time, political talk has been found to be a significant predictor of forms political participation (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; McLeod et al., 1999). Although political talk of course also can take place online, on participatory platforms, surveys usually tap into the frequency of political talk in offline settings.

Online news consumption. Kraaykamp and Van Eijck (2005) report positive relationships between openness and reading literature and watching cultural and informative television programs (no effects are found for extraversion), while Mondak and Halperin (2008) show that extraversion positively relates to newspaper consumption and watching television news, while Trilling and Schoenbach (forthcoming) show the same for online news consumption. A wide range of extant literature, in turn, demonstrates that news consumption is related to political participation. While it is known that reading newspapers and watching television news predicts participatory behavior (e.g., Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Jeffres, Lee, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 2007; Moy, 1999; Scheufele, 2002), an extensive meta-analysis by Boulianne (2009) showed that online news consumption is a key predictor of offline forms political participation. Bakker and De Vreese (2011) demonstrated that following the news on online newspaper and news sites also predicts online forms of engagement, such as signing online petitions and visiting political websites.

Although not all results are inconclusive and the relationships between personality and political participatory media use is still rather unexplored, the literature provides sufficient cues to formulate the following hypotheses:

H3: The effects of openness to experience and extraversion on the political uses of participatory media are mediated by political talk, political interest, and online news consumption.

THE MODERATING ROLE OF EXTERNAL EFFICACY. We have argued that people with specific personality traits and political attitudes are more likely to make use of participatory media. But does this proposed mechanism apply to everybody? We suggest that there is a particular role for external efficacy. External efficacy refers to individuals' feeling or belief that the government is responsive to its citizens (Balch, 1974). Consequently, higher levels of external efficacy have commonly been linked with higher levels of conventional forms of participation (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; McLeod et al., 1999; Schaffer, 1981). However, at the same time it has been found that citizens with less confidence in the responsiveness of their government are more likely to engage in *alternative* forms of political participation (Vedlitz & Veblen, 1980). Also recently, Schuck and De Vreese (2011) demonstrated that people who are low in external efficacy are more likely to turn out at referendums. Although less conclusively, such findings have also been

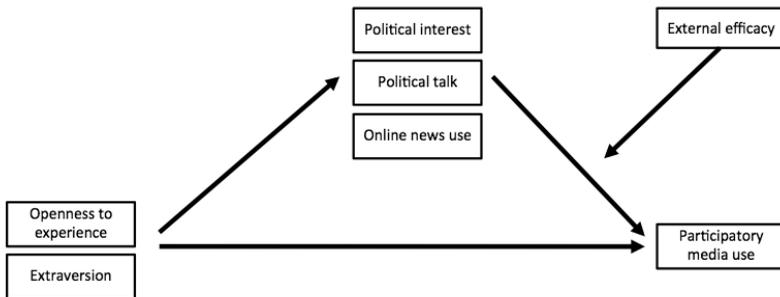
reported by others (Donovan & Karp, 2006; McLeod et al., 1999; Pomper & Sernekos, 1991). Extending this line of argumentation, it could be that lower levels of confidence of the performance and responsiveness of mainstream media and politics also drive the use of participatory media. As Bowman and Willis (2003) note: “The conglomeration and corporatization of media and the sophisticated means by which sources (such as *politicians* and business executives) ‘spin’ media leaves the mass audience often grasping to make sense of the news and wondering what information to trust.” (p. 40). And, as Bennett (2008) contends, (younger) citizens can both be interested in politics, but at the same time be critical of the responsiveness of politicians and their performance within mainstream media or conventional political platforms.

Given the theoretical assumption – supported by a few empirical studies – that lower external efficacy could result in an increase in participation, we tentatively hypothesize:

H4: Under the condition of lower external efficacy, the relationships between online news consumption, interest, and talk on the one hand and contributing political content to participatory media on the other, becomes stronger.

The hypothesized relationships are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Proposed model to explain the political use of participatory media use



Note. The moderating effect of external efficacy on the relationship between the mediators and the dependent variable is only hypothesized in case participatory media use is operationalized as actively contributing content to participatory media.

METHOD

A CAWI survey was conducted among a sample (N=2,130), representative of the Dutch population in terms of sociodemographics³. The fieldwork was conducted in December 2009 and carried out by research company TNS NIPO. The company maintains a respondent database with more than 230,000 respondents that is representative of the Dutch population. Prior to the final fieldwork, a pre-test (n=74) was conducted. The average completion time of the survey was 20 minutes and the response rate 73% (AAPOR RR1). The final dataset consisted of 2,081 cases because 49 cases were removed due to invalid responses.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

Respondents were asked about the political uses of the following participatory platforms and media: blogs, Twitter, social networks, discussion forums, comments and uploading user-generated content. A distinction was made between 'consuming' and 'contributing', e.g., reading political tweets on Twitter versus writing and publishing political Tweets; following discussions on social networks about political issues versus interacting with political content (liking, installing apps, posting comments) et cetera⁴. In case respondents indicated to consume (read, follow, visit), at least once per month, one or more of the above-mentioned participatory media, they were classified as 'consumers' (18.1%, n=376), if they also contributed political content at least monthly they were 'contributors' (5.8%, n=121), while individuals who did not consume nor contribute content were categorized as 'inactives' (76.1%, n=1583).

Eventually, two dichotomous variables were used in the final analyses. The first variable distinguished between those who consume participatory media (i.e., consumers and contributors) and those who do not (inactives). The second variable was created to separate between those who contribute content (contributors) and those who do not (inactives and consumers).⁵

It is important to note something about the hypothesized direction of the causal relationships in this study between personality, the mediators and participatory media use. It is widely acknowledged that personality traits have a genetic basis and that they are therefore largely heritable (Bouchard Jr. & Loehlin, 2001). Given the dispositional nature of personality, it is commonly

assumed that an individual's personality remains largely unaltered and that as a result, one's personality affects attitudes and behavior. Therefore, we in this study hypothesize that the causal relationship in this study runs from personality – through attitudes – to behavior instead of the other way around. However, it is important to note recent work has discussed not only the possibility that both personality and attitudes are influenced by an underlying common genetic structure, but also that reciprocal relationships between traits, attitudes and behavior exist (Verhulst, Eaves, & Hatemi, 2012).

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Extraversion was measured with four items from 1-7 and formed a reliable scale ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .70$). Openness to experience was measured using 1 item on a 7-point scale that tapped into curiosity ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.46$). Although curiosity is usually viewed as one of the components on which openness to experience is based, it has been noted curiosity is a “fundamental motivational component of all openness facets” (Kashdan, 2004, p. 126).

While early measures of the Big Five included 240 items (McCrae & Costa, 1992), increasingly scholars have started to use shorter inventories (Credé, Harms, Niehorster, & Gaye-Valentine 2012), as low as 5 items to measure the Big Five. Although shorter inventories may pose a threat to the construct validity and reliability, shorter fill-in times could increase the quality of answers compared to longer surveys (Credé et al., 2012). Given the relatively extensive survey that respondents were presented with (20 minutes average completion time), a preference was given to parsimonious measurements.

MEDIATING AND MODERATING VARIABLES

Political talk, political interest and online news consumption are modeled as mediating variables in this study. Political talk was probed with one item on an 8-point scale (0-7, in days per week, $M = 1.28$, $SD = 1.58$).⁶ Political interest was measured with one item on a 1-7 scale ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.76$) and online news consumption in days per week, with one item on a 0-7 scale ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 2.78$). External efficacy was gauged with three 7-point items ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.47$, $\alpha = .78$).

CONTROL VARIABLES

We control for the impact of sociodemographic variables gender (1=male), age (in years) and education (low-high). First, it allows us to establish whether or not age, gender and education are defining factors in predicting participation, even when various other factors are controlled for. This would shed more light on the notion that the online political landscape is still, as is the case with offline and traditional forms of political participation (Verba & Nie, 1972), dominated by highly educated older males (Hindman, 2009).

The complete question wording can be found in Appendix A. A correlation analysis was run with all variables to examine the strength of mutual relationships (Appendix B).

ANALYSIS

To test the hypothesized model the SPSS PROCESS macro was used (Hayes, 2012), which allows us to combine path analysis-based moderation and mediation analyses in a conditional process model. Two separate models were tested, using consuming participatory media and contributing to participatory media as dependent variables respectively. In order to measure all relevant coefficients with two independent variables in the model, PROCESS requires running the model twice (each time modeling one independent variable as the independent variable and the other as one of the covariate). In order to assess whether the indirect effects are significant, we generate 95% bias corrected confidence intervals using bootstrapping. Bootstrapping is a non-parametric approach for testing the significance of indirect effects (as is the case with mediation) by generating multiple samples (with replacement) from the original sample, resulting in bias corrected confidence intervals and eventually a final confidence interval. If this interval does not include zero (both the lower and ultimate limit are either above or below zero), the indirect effect is considered significant. Further, bootstrapping is preferred because it also allows analyzing the significance of moderated mediation (see H4) by producing confidence intervals for indirect effects at specific values of one or more moderators (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). In this study we will present confidence intervals for the moderator (external efficacy) at the mean and at one standard deviation below and above the mean.

RESULTS

People who are extravert and open to experiences are more likely to use participatory media for political purposes (see Table 1 to Table 4). Furthermore, the effects of these personality traits are not only direct. It appears that extraversion and openness also increase the chance that people are interested in politics, talk about politics and consume online news, factors that in turn also have a positive effect on participatory media use. The first two hypotheses that specific personality traits would increase the chance that individuals would use participatory media for political purposes are thus confirmed.

When looking at Table 2 for example, we see that the direct effects are .15 and .17 for openness and extraversion respectively, while all the coefficients for the indirect effects are also positive. The indirect effects are significant, because the bootstrapped confidence intervals do not include zero. There is no direct effect of openness on contributing participatory media, as the coefficient (.14) is not significant. Translating the coefficients for the direct effects (.15 and .17) in Table 2 to odd ratios (by taking the natural exponent of the coefficients), reveals that a one-unit increase on the 1-7 scale of openness, increases the chance to consume participatory media, with 16% ($=e^{.15}$), while a one-unit increase in extraversion increases the chance to be categorized as a consumer with 19% ($=e^{.17}$). With regard to the direct effect of extraversion on contributing, transforming the coefficient (.35) to odd ratios reveals that only a one-unit (again on a 1-7 scale) increase in extraversion – for example by scoring a 4.0 instead of 3.0 – increases the chance of contributing political content to participatory media with 42%.

The third hypothesis stated that the effects of personality would be mediated by political interest, political talk and online news consumption. This indeed seems the case. First of all, the relationships between the two trait variables and the mediators are positive and significant, as the coefficients in the first three columns of Table 1 and Table 3 show, and the effects (with one exception) of political talk, political interest and online news consumption on the outcome variables are also significant. To see whether there are indeed significant indirect effects, the coefficients in Table 2 and Table 4 have to be examined. Here we see that the indirect effects of the mediators are indeed positive and significant. Thus, the effects are mediated. For the effect of openness on contributing to participatory media, it can be seen that the

indirect effects are significant but the direct effect (.14) is not (Table 3). Our expectations regarding the mediated effects (H3) are thus confirmed.

In order to better understand the magnitude of the indirect effects, it is possible to also translate them into odd ratios and calculate chance that these will change. For example, with regard to effect of openness, through political talk, on consuming participatory media (Table 2), we find that a one-unit increase in openness the odds to fall in the category of 'consumers of participatory media' increase with 2% ($=e^{.09 \cdot 24}$). As for the indirect effect of extraversion, through political interest, on contributing to participatory media (Table 4), it is found that (excluding the interaction from the interpretation) the odds to be categorized as a 'contributor to participatory media' increases with 8% in case of a one-unit increase in extraversion.

Also relevant to note are the positive effects of political talk, interest and online news consumption on using participatory media. This confirms our expectation that predictors of conventional forms of participation are also predictive of more contemporary forms of participation.

We further find that males and those with a high education are more likely to talk about politics, to be interest and to use online news (see the coefficients in the first three lines of Table 1 and Table 3). The direct links between age, gender and education and participatory media use however do not show this pattern. However, these effects are hard to interpret, as the indirect effects through the mediators are not visible in these coefficients.

Table 1 Effects of personality on talk, interest, online news consumption and consuming participatory media

	Political talk	Political interest	Online news consumption	Consuming part. media
Gender	.39 (.07) ***	.48 (.07) ***	.65 (.12) ***	-.30 (.12) *
Age	.02 (.00) ***	.04 (.00) ***	-.01 (.00) ***	-.01 (.00) *
Education	.59 (.07) ***	.76 (.07) ***	.97 (.12) ***	-.01 (.13)
Openness to experience	.09 (.09) ***	.17 (.03) ***	.26 (.05) ***	.15 (.05) **
Extraversion	.26 (.03) ***	.20 (.04) ***	.16 (.06) *	.17 (.07) *
Political talk				.24 (.04) ***
Political interest				.26 (.04) ***
Online news consumption				.31 (.02) ***
Constant	-1.46 (.18) ***	-.15 (.19)	.54 (.33)	-4.48 (.39) ***
R ²	.14	.25	.09	
R ² (Nagelkerke)				.33

Note. N=2,065. From the 2,081 original cases 16 were deleted because of missing education data.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 2 Direct and indirect effects of personality on consuming participatory media

	Effect	Boot strapped SE	Boot strapped LLCI	Boot strapped ULCI
<i>Openness</i>				
Direct effect	0.15 (.05) **			
Indirect effects				
Total	0.14	0.02	0.10	0.19
Talk	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04
Interest	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.07
Online news consumption	0.08	0.02	0.05	0.11
<i>Extraversion</i>				
Direct effect	0.17 (.07) *			
Indirect effects				
Total	0.16	0.03	0.11	0.22
Talk	0.06	0.01	0.04	0.09
Interest	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.08
Online news consumption	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.09

Note. Number of bootstrap samples = 5000. Level of confidence for all confidence intervals = .95. *LLCI* = lower limit confidence interval, *ULCI* = upper limit confidence interval.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 3 Effects of personality on talk, interest, online news consumption and contributing to participatory media

	Political talk	Political interest	Online news consumption	Contributing	Contributing (incl. mod.)
Gender	.39 (.07) ***	.48 (.07) ***	.65 (.12) ***	.22 (.21)	.22 (.21)
Age	.02 (.00) ***	.04 (.00) ***	-.01 (.00) **	-.04 (.01) ***	-.04 (.01) ***
Education	.59 (.07) ***	.76 (.07) ***	.97 (.12) ***	-.29 (.22)	-.26 (.22)
Openness to experience	.09 (.03) ***	.17 (.03) ***	.26 (.05) ***	.14 (.10)	.14 (.10)
Extraversion	.26 (.03) ***	.20 (.04) ***	.16 (.06) *	.35 (.12) **	.34 (.12) **
Political talk				.14 (.06) *	.05(.15)
Political interest				.37 (.08) ***	.81 (.18) ***
Online news consumption				.22 (.04) ***	.23 (.09) *
External efficacy					.51 (.22) *
Ext. eff. * talk					.04 (.04)
Ext. eff. * interest					-.14 (.05) **
Ext. eff. * news consumption					-.00 (.03)
Constant	-1.4639	-.1507	.5446	-6.1399	-7.8883
R ²	.14	.25	.09		
R ² (Nagelkerke)				.23	.24

Note. N=2,065. From the 2,081 original cases 16 were deleted because of missing education data.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Table 4 Direct and indirect effects of personality on contributing to participatory media

	Effect	Boot strapped SE	Boot strapped LLCI	Boot strapped ULCI
<i>Openness</i>				
Direct effect	.14 (.10)			
Indirect effects				
Total	0.13	0.02	0.09	0.19
Talk	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.03
Interest	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.11
Online news consumption	0.06	0.01	0.03	0.09
<i>Extraversion</i>				
Direct effect	.35 (.12) **			
Indirect effects				
Total	0.15	0.03	0.08	0.20
Talk	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.07
Interest	0.07	0.02	0.04	0.12
Online news consumption	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.07

Note. Number of bootstrap samples = 5000. Level of confidence for all confidence intervals = .95. *LLCI* = lower limit confidence interval, *ULCI* = upper limit confidence interval.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

The last hypothesis (H4) proposed a moderated mediation: The effects of personality through the mediators on using participatory media would be stronger for those lower on external efficacy. As the last column of Table 3 shows, the interaction between political interest and efficacy is significant (-.14). Looking in closer detail, the bootstrapped confidence intervals of the

conditional indirect effects (Table 5) reveal that the effects of extraversion and openness are indeed significant for respondents with a low (-1 SD) or average (M) level of external efficacy, while the effect for those high on efficacy (+1 SD) are not significant.

In other words, the findings reveal that for those who do not have much confidence in the responsiveness of the political system (low external efficacy), there are indeed effects of extraversion and openness on political interest, which in turn impacts the chance to contribute political content to participatory media. While these effects are still there (though weaker) for people who possess an average sense of political efficacy, the mechanism does not apply for individuals who are highly confident about the responsiveness of the political system (high external efficacy). As we have found significant effects for the interaction of external efficacy with interest, but not for efficacy with political talk and online news consumption, hypothesis 4 is partly supported.

Table 5 Conditional indirect effects of personality traits on contributing to participatory media at different values of external efficacy

	External efficacy	Effect	Boot strapped SE	Boot strapped LLCI	Boot strapped ULCI
<i>Openness</i>					
Political interest	1.69	0.10	0.03	0.05	0.16
Political interest	3.16	0.07	0.02	0.03	0.11
Political interest	4.64	0.03	0.02	-0.00	0.07
Political talk	1.69	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.03
Political talk	3.16	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.03
Political talk	4.64	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.05
Online news consumption	1.69	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.10
Online news consumption	3.16	0.06	0.01	0.03	0.09
Online news consumption	4.64	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.10
<i>Extraversion</i>					
Political interest	1.69	0.12	0.03	0.07	0.19
Political interest	3.16	0.08	0.02	0.04	0.13
Political interest	4.64	0.04	0.02	-0.00	0.09
Political talk	1.69	0.03	0.02	-0.02	0.07
Political talk	3.16	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.07
Political talk	4.64	0.05	0.03	0.00	0.10
Online news consumption	1.69	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.08
Online news consumption	3.16	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.07
Online news consumption	4.64	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.08

Note. Values for the moderator External efficacy in the first column are the mean and plus/minus one SD from mean. Number of bootstrap samples: 1000. Level of confidence for all confidence intervals: .95. *LLCI* = lower limit confidence interval, *ULCI* = upper limit confidence interval.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to shed light on the factors that help explain the use of participatory media by citizens to inform and express themselves about politics. Although many have hailed the political potential of participatory media, recent studies showed that there is only a small share of people who actually use participatory media for political purposes. Therefore, the question as to what the characteristics of this group are, becomes even more relevant. Employing a unique combination of theoretical starting points, we posited that there are various factors that could help to explain the participation of citizens in online participatory platforms.

We find evidence that typical psychological variables as well as established 'political' predictors help to explain the use of tools like Facebook, Twitter, forums and the like. Extravert and 'open' people are more likely to use these media. Moreover, their personality increases the chance that they talk to others about politics (given their preference for new and social situations) and also makes it more likely that they are interested in politics and consumes online news (because they tend to be outgoing, curious and have many interests), which in turn influences participatory media use. Further, the negative effect of political efficacy for some relationships, suggest that those who have a low to average confidence in the responsiveness of the political system are more likely to turn to alternative ways of engagement, such as contributing political content to participatory media.

The explanatory power of personality variables advances our understanding of what political users of participatory media 'are like'. Hitherto, there has been no or little research that has combined the insights from psychological studies and traditional political participation studies to explain the use of participatory media. While our study has only examined two psychological factors that could play a role, we contend that there are most likely more extant psychological mechanisms that may serve as handles for sketching a more complete profile of participatory people on the Web. This feeling is corroborated by the fact that our analysis included three typical strong predictors of political participatory behavior: talk, interest and news use (Boulianne, 2009). However, three of the four direct relationships between personality and using participatory media remained significant.

Of course, there are various practical considerations when deciding to contribute to participatory media, like ‘simple’ costs and benefits analyses (Li, 2010). However, recent studies lend support to the notion that psychological characteristics may be important in various aspects, and thus should be explored in future studies. For example, it could be that people who are more ‘risk averse’ could be less likely to participate because “any error will be just one Google search away for anyone to see” (Samuel, 2010, para. 1). Also, the various links between emotion and political behavior (Marcus et al., 2000) may be extended to the realm of participatory media. And, different mechanisms may of course apply depending on the action that is performed: Hitting a ‘like’-button on Facebook while only your personal friends can see it is a significantly different activity than openly and extensively expressing oneself on a public blog on sensitive political topics. This is also one of the limitations of this study: We do not have information about what citizens precisely *do* on participatory media. Also, given the very low number of active political users of participatory media, we were only able to construct dichotomous variables that distinguished between using and not using. Data about the intensity of participatory media use would for example have helped to provide insight into factors that explain excessive participatory media use.

This study of course was only one step in shedding more light on the factors that determine the political use of participatory media. There certainly are more factors (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009) and the link between personality and political attitudes may be even more complex (Verhulst et al., 2012). However, also recently it has been demonstrated that in order to explain politically oriented behavior, it is relevant to establish expectations that are theoretically founded in neighboring disciplines such as psychology (Mondak et al., 2010; Orchard & Fullwood, 2010). The role of personality may even be erroneously overlooked when not also indirect effects through political attitudes are considered (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). Relatedly, as the relationship between personality and behavior is context-dependent, future research should focus on further disentangling the complex interactions between specific personality traits, social settings and media use – which together can impact how people think, feel or behave.

Our study also has practical implications. In general, our findings could suggest that the online political sphere perhaps somewhat mirrors the participation patterns that are promoted by supporters of representative

democracy, who suggest that democracy functions best when only a small share of the population is actively involved in the political decision making process (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002). Simply put, they argue that not all citizens have the desire or the potential to participate, and massive participation at every stage of the political process would be far from efficient. From their perspective, the low participation rates and the overrepresentation of extravert and 'open' individual on the Internet would thus not be considered very problematic. However, with the emergence of Internet many have seen possibilities to create a more participatory democracy model, which advocates the maximization of political involvement of citizens from all backgrounds. The Internet would, for example, also give introvert people the chance to get themselves heard. Given the fact that individuals with specific trait characteristics – which are unlikely to change given their genetic basis – are overrepresented, media educators and policy makers should take the role of personality traits into account when trying to mobilize 'the audience' into political involvement.

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APPENDIX A

Question wording and scales survey items

Extraversion (1-7, completely disagree – completely agree)

I am someone who actively seeks as much information as I can in a new situation

I really enjoy talking to people

I like to be where the action is

I you usually take the initiative in making new friends

Openness to experience (1-7, completely disagree – completely agree)

I am a curious person

Online news consumption (0-7 days)

How many days in a regular week (Monday until Sunday) do you read or watch news on the Internet?

Political talk (0-7 days)

How many days in a regular week (Monday until Sunday) do you talk about politics with others?

Political interest (1-7, not interested at all – very interested)

Generally speaking, how interested are you in politics?

External efficacy (1-7, completely disagree – completely agree)

People like me don't have any say about what government does [reverse coded]

I don't think public officials care much what people like me think [reverse coded]

Parties are only interested in people's votes but not in their opinions [reverse coded]

Dependent variables

The measurement of ‘consuming’ and ‘contributing’ – our main dependent variables – was constructed based on the answers on a variety of questions about activities on participatory media, described below. For each activity a short explanation was given as to what we meant. When the question pertained to ‘politics’, an info-box was shown where we explained what was meant with ‘politics’ (see endnote 4). The answer categories were: never; maximum once per year; a few times per day; about once per month; a few times per month; once per week; a few times per week; nearly every day.

Comments

How often do you read comments on the Internet?

How often do you read comments on the Internet that are related to political issues?

How often do you write comments on the Internet?

How often do you write comments on the Internet that are related to political issues?

Forums

How often do you read or follow discussions on discussion forums on the Internet?

How often do you read or follow discussions on discussion forums on the Internet that are related to political issues?

How often do you participate in discussions on discussion forums on the Internet?

How often do you participate in discussions on discussion forums on the Internet that are related to political issues?

Social networks [activities: joining fan pages, commenting on walls; use gadgets/widgets, engage in discussions]

How often do you follow activities on social networks?

How often do you follow activities that are related to politics on social networks?

How often do you participate in activities on social networks?

How often do you participate in activities that are related to politics on social networks?

Blogs

How often do you read personal blogs?

How often do you read personal blogs that are regularly writing about political issues?

If you have a blog yourself: How often you do write on your own blog?

How often do you write about political issues?

If you blog on a blog from someone else: How often do you write on that blog (those blogs)?

How often do you write on that blog (those blogs) about political issues?

Uploading

How often do you publish self-made photos or videos on the Web?

How often do you publish self-made photos or videos on the Web about political issues?

How often do you publish photos or videos on the Web that you have found elsewhere on the web?

How often do you publish photos or videos on the Web that you have found elsewhere on the web about political issues?

APPENDIX B

Correlation matrix relevant variables

	Con suming	Con tributing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Openness	.21**	.13**	1.00							
2. Extraversion	.20**	.14**	.45**	1.00						
3. Gender	.02	.05*	-.02	-.05*	1.00					
4. Age	-.03	-.10**	-.11**	-.09**	.07**	1.00				
5. Education	.15**	.07**	.23**	.12**	.05*	-.04*	1.00			
6. Online news	.40**	.19**	.21**	.14**	.11**	-.07**	.21**	1.00		
7. Political interest	.27**	.16**	.21**	.18**	.18**	.35**	.24**	.17**	1.00	
8. Political talk	.30**	.17**	.16**	.20**	.14**	.18**	.21**	.19**	.54**	1.00
9. External efficacy	.02	.02	.03	.00	-.03	-.13**	.14**	.03	.08**	.05**

* $p \leq .05$, two-tailed. ** $p \leq .01$, two-tailed.

NOTES

¹ At the same time, it is relevant to not equate conventional news consumption (e.g., reading newspapers, visiting online news sites) with passive uses of participatory media. While the first relates to updating oneself with general news and current affairs, the latter is typically associated with actively seeking out and keeping track of participatory platforms where interactions between users are central instead of the publication of news

² The descriptions of openness to experience and extraversion to some extent seem to overlap, as both traits manifest themselves in forms of exploratory behavior (Peterson, Smith, & Carson, 2002). However, they are treated as personality research, and they are associated with different character descriptions. While openness has been linked with intellect, enjoying new experiences and having wide range of interest, extraversion is linked with positive emotionality and being talkative. Although in our study the correlation between the traits (.45) is substantive, it is not sufficient indication that the same concept is being measured.

³ Weights were applied to ensure national representativeness regarding gender, age, education, social class, household size and geographical region.

⁴ The following definition of 'political (issues)' was used and shown with every relevant question: "*Political issues* refers to topics where politicians or political parties are involved, or where political policy and legislation are mentioned. These issues may involve local, domestic or international politics and can relate to a wide variety of fields, such as health care, defense, immigration, elections, security, education, culture, traffic, real estate and housing, tax issues et cetera".

⁵ The two variables could also have been constructed differently. Now, in the 'consumption' variable, both consumers and contributors were included – contributors could have been excluded from the analysis. And, in the 'contribution' variable, both inactives and consumers were categorized as non-contributors – here consumers could have been excluded from the analysis. In order to check whether our construction of the variables obfuscated the results, additional analyses were run in which we used two modified variables. In the analysis for 'consuming' we excluded the contributors, and for the 'contribution analysis' we removed the consumers. There were no apparent differences compared to the original analyses. Only – for the consuming analysis – the link between extraversion and news consumption became insignificant. For the contributing analysis, the direct effect of extraversion on consuming participatory media disappeared but the indirect effect remained significant.

⁶ It could be argued that there is conceptual overlap between political talk and participatory media use, given the fact that the latter includes forms of online discussion.

However, the phrasing of the political talk question indicates that 'real life' (i.e., offline) political conversations with friends, family or colleagues is asked about.

Chapter 4

What's journalism got to do with it? A content analysis of political citizen blogs^{*}

^{*} An earlier version of this chapter has been submitted for publication and is currently being revised (R&R).

Citizens have traditionally been dependent on professional news organizations for their political news. But this exclusive intermediary role of traditional media has come, ostensibly, under pressure with the advent of what commonly is called citizen journalism. Of course there have always been forms of audience participation in the news process, in the form of letters to the editor and calls to the newsroom. But free and easy-to-use digital tools have significantly lowered the threshold for participation. While the definition and boundaries of the journalistic profession have always been challenged, the Web seems to have definitely extended the conventional understanding of who can do journalistic work. What is this work like, and who are its actors? This is what we want to answer with a thorough content analysis of a representative sample of political blogs in the Netherlands.

Not only do news organizations call upon their audience to send in all sorts of user-generated content such as photos and videos (The Bivings Group, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008), but also citizens themselves have started news outlets by using weblogs. These activities of citizens on their blogs have often been greeted as brave acts of liberation from the dependency on professional journalists who are often accused of having become too detached from their public (see Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007; Deuze, 2003; Gillmor, 2004; Haas, 2005).

The estimated amount of blogs worldwide surpassed 30 million in 2006 (Technorati, 2006) and 170 million mid 2011 (www.blogpulse.com). Worldwide surveys by blog tracking company Technorati showed that politics indeed is, besides personal topics and technology, one of the most popular topics to blog about (Technorati, 2008; 2009). Particularly in the US, blogs covering political affairs have boosted since the 2004 presidential elections (Perlmutter, 2008; Rainie, Cornfield & Corrigan, 2005). Their popularity and influence has steadily grown and has become particularly visible in the periods leading up to the 2008 and 2012 elections (Messner & Garrison, 2011; Wallsten, 2011; Wicks, Bradley, Blackburn, & Fields, 2011).

Weblogs have been ascribed various roles and functions, sometimes even performed at the same time (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008; Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010; McKenna & Pole, 2008). Of course, here we have to distinguish between Western democracies and countries with movements fighting for (more) political participation of the citizenry, for example in the 'Arab spring' of 2011 (Howard & Parks, 2012). Our study is located in the Netherlands, one of the world's oldest democracies. This is why

our search for what we already know about political bloggers and their activities is limited to evidence from Western democracies. There, one of the most typical uses of political blogs seems to be the one of an online *news aggregator* and to provide hyperlinks to other sites (Lowrey, 2006). But blogs have also been heralded as *platforms* for citizen journalists, where original and alternative information is published (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). A typical feature of political blogs is said to be the use of a *personal* and *opinionated* writing style, in contrast to traditional conventions in professional journalism (Lasica, 2003). Blogs sometimes seem to have explicit political agendas (McKenna, 2007) and try to politically mobilize their audience (McKenna & Pole, 2008). This is certainly much more the case in countries where blogging serves as an alternative to state-controlled media.

A DEMOCRATIC UTOPIA?

Jürgen Habermas' ideal of the *public sphere* is a public and egalitarian space for deliberation where matters of common concern can be discussed (Habermas, 1962). It is argued that the *blogosphere*, again in Western democracies, is closer to this ideal than ever before (Benkler, 2006): It "attenuates the power of the commercial mass-media owners and those who can pay them. It provides an avenue for substantially more diverse and politically mobilized communication than was feasible in a commercial mass media with a small number of speakers and a vast number of passive recipients" (p. 465). A greater diversity of standpoints in the public discourse thus could be the outcome once ordinary people have their say; information, otherwise uncovered, would be provided; and professional journalists would be stimulated to do a better job (e.g., Bowman & Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2008; Gillmor, 2004).

Critics, however, have expressed the fear that the extended participation of lay people endangers the central role of professional journalists as competent interpreters of public affairs and as agenda-setters of the public debate (e.g., Keen, 2007; Lemann, 2006; Sunstein, 2007). A more moderate standpoint acknowledges the potential of citizen media but argues that only a small – and rather elitist – part of the online population actually uses the Web for producing journalistic content or promoting political goals. But this small portion of the blogosphere seems to account for the majority of worldwide blog visits. From this view, the dominance of journalists and political elites in public discourse is far from fading (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Hindman, 2009).

In this study, we will present the results of a large-scale and systematic content analysis of political blogs and their producers. Its purpose is to shed light into how justified the hopes and fears are and to contribute to a better understanding of the nature, the breadth and depth of political blogging.

EVIDENCE ON POLITICAL BLOGGING

WHO BLOGS?

Journalism has traditionally been dominated by white males, mostly in older age categories (e.g., Deuze, 2002; Van Zoonen, 1998; Weaver, Beamm, Brownlee, Voakes & Wilhoit, 2006). Blogging has raised hopes that it gives “anyone with the right talent and energy the ability to be heard far and wide on the Web” (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 8). A few content analyses and surveys have investigated forms of political blogging, defined as dealing with political events, actors, issues and processes. They show that the authors are in most cases still males. Women express more interest in blogging about private or hobby topics (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Pedersen & Macafee, 2007). Also the most popular and famous political bloggers are mostly men (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Further, it appears that most political bloggers hold an above-average educational degree and often are academics, businessmen, journalists or lawyers (Hindman, 2009; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Reese et al., 2006). In the previous chapters, it was already found that, in the Netherlands, people who participate politically on participatory platforms (such as blogs) feel more efficacious in politics, talk more about politics, have a higher interest, vote more often, and have better Internet skills.

These data suggest characteristics of political bloggers known from other forms of political participation. However, most of the available demographic data concerns either ‘hobby’ bloggers or ‘elite’ bloggers. Very little is known about the group of political citizen bloggers: those people who were expected to enter the public and political debate now that it is possible more than ever (Gillmor, 2004).

THE CONTENT OF POLITICAL BLOGS

ORIGINAL CONTENT AND TOPICS. Most blogs on politics seem to heavily use and link to material that was originally published in mainstream news media (Lee & Jeong, 2007; Messner & Distaso, 2008; Wallsten, 2007). McKenna and Pole (2008) reported that more than 90% of political bloggers indicate that an important activity is to provide readers with hyperlinks to interesting newspaper articles. Nonetheless, Carpenter (2008) found that citizen sites and blogs used more 'unofficial' sources than online newspapers did. Little is known about the topics that bloggers cover. Although the content of specific blog 'genres' such as policy blogs and war blogs have been described (McKenna, 2007; Tremayne et al., 2006), an overall view of what the political topics are that bloggers cover is missing.

INTENTIONS. Do bloggers see themselves as media or political watchdogs or as a 'Fifth Estate' (Cooper, 2006), closely monitoring the performance of politicians and mainstream media? A survey among political bloggers by McKenna and Pole (2008) showed that 80% of their sample wants to inform about failings and bias of mainstream news media.

Other studies have shown that blogs often want to be a platform where individuals can unrestrictedly voice their personal political messages, promote their own goals without being filtered by professional news organizations and organize and try to mobilize their visitors (e.g., Kahn & Kellner, 2005; McKenna, 2007; Pirch, 2008). But also simply expressing one's very personal opinion is common on weblogs (e.g., Herring et al., 2005; Papacharissi, 2007; Reese et al., 2007; Tremayne, Zheng, Lee & Jeong, 2006; Wall, 2005). Carpenter (2008) compared online newspapers and citizen journalism sites and found that citizen outlets contained significantly more opinion.

THE USE OF INTERACTIVITY AND HYPERLINKS. Although blogs are viewed as having more communicative and interactive potential than traditional news media, the actual use of such options is not very widespread (e.g., Herring et al., 2005; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl & Sapp, 2006). However, the use of the comment feature, providing contact details and hyperlinking, seems more common on political blogs than on non-political blogs (McKenna & Pole, 2008; Xenos, 2008). Political bloggers provide their readers both with links to mainstream news media and to less popular and alternative information outlets (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; McKenna & Pole, 2008; Tremayne et al., 2006).

In sum, first and foremost, the majority of our evidence on blogging about politics is exploratory in nature and is based on small convenience or

purposive samples. Second, most empirical studies have primarily focused on non-political blogs or on political blogs that rank high on the blog hit parades, attract thousands of daily visitors and, perhaps most importantly, receive considerable attention also from the mainstream media. Although such studies provide valuable insights into the potential of these new information channels, they tell us little about the vast amount of blogs that fall outside this 'elite' category and do not contribute to our knowledge of blogs by 'regular' citizens (see also Wallsten, 2005).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

More reliably than before, this study wants to investigate the contribution of blogs to the public sphere. Is it true that considerably more people now participate in the political discourse that were silent in the past? That blogs address issues and topics that had been neglected before? And do bloggers themselves intend to complement or even substitute traditional media and journalists? For these purposes, we study the Dutch political blogosphere. The Netherlands had an Internet penetration of 90% in 2009 and 94% in 2011 (CBS, 2011) and is a digital front-runner compared to other European countries (Löf & Seybert, 2009). This situation, combined with the long tradition of the Netherlands as a democracy, would lend itself for a diverse and lively online blogosphere. In detail, we formulate the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the *demographic composition* of political bloggers?

RQ2: What are the *topics* political bloggers write about?

RQ3: How *original and authentic* is the content on political blogs? More specifically, we ask: How much information on blogs is based on own experience and research as opposed to relying on mainstream media?

RQ4: What are the *intentions* of political bloggers?

RQ5: How often are weblogs a platform for *interactivity and discussion*?

RQ6: Which different types of political blogs can be identified?

METHOD

In order to answer our research questions, a quantitative content analysis of political blogs in the Netherlands was conducted.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES

It is safe to assume there are hundreds of active political blogs in the Netherlands¹. However, drawing a representative sample from such an intangible online area like the Web or the blogosphere has proven to be hard if not impossible because of the dynamic nature of online content and the decentralized organization of the Web (McMillan, 2000; Li & Walejko, 2008). Taking into account the methodological issues and using a multi-step approach, we drew a sample from the broadest scope of political blogs possible. By using a diversity of sampling conditions in two phases, we aimed at approximating a probability sample to overcome the problems with generalizability typically associated with purposive and convenience samples (Riffe et al., 2005).

The first phase comprised multiple searches with a list of keywords (see Appendix A) in the five most authoritative and largest blog databases (Google Blog Search, Technorati, Blogpulse, Truthlaidbear and Icerocket). The list of blogs was purged from duplicate blogs, non-Dutch blogs, spam blogs and abandoned ones (blogs not updated in the last month).

The second phase of creating our sample was separating ‘political blogs’ from non-political blogs. Although political blogs have been under scrutiny in several content analyses in recent years, a common definition of what makes them ‘political’ does not seem to have emerged. This is also a problem of proportion: How much politics, however defined, makes a blog ‘political’? Most blogs seem to cover more than one topic, and political events, actors, issues or processes may just be one of them.

We chose a practical solution: For a *blog* to be considered political it should meet one of two criteria. The first of them is that the blog ‘advertises’ itself explicitly as focusing on politics. This was checked for in the header, byline, or the ‘About’ section of the blog. But because many blogs are not that explicit about their intentions, the other criterion for inclusion was that out of the five most recent *blog posts*, at least two had to be a political post. A blog post is a *political* post if it contains ‘political content’ at least once. We chose a conservative definition of political content, based on the concept of institutional politics: “any text where local, national, foreign or supranational politicians, political parties, political institutions or governmental policy is mentioned.”

After taking the steps as described above, a total of 162 blogs was included in the final analysis. Because blogs differ in size and some contain

more than a thousand entries, from every blog the ten most recent political blog posts were archived. In order to yield substantial information from the blog posts, posts without text (i.e., only a photo or movie) were excluded. The blog pages and posts were downloaded in PDF and .PNG format, which allowed us to preserve both the original layout of the websites and their hyperlinks. All material was archived at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research in July 2009.

To analyze general blog characteristics and blogger details, the weblog served as the unit of analysis. This included the front page and all other pages (e.g., *Contact*, *About me*, *Mission statement*, *Background information*). The individual blog posts were the unit of analysis for coding the content of blog posts.

MEASURES

WHO BLOGS? The coded blogger characteristics were age-category, gender, education, profession and ethnic origin of the blogger. When information was not available but answers could clearly be deduced from the blog (i.e., talking about recent retirement categorizes a blogger in the age-category 61-70). To determine to what extent bloggers stayed anonymous, we coded the presence of the real name of the blogger, a recognizable photo of the blogger, plus the possibilities to get in touch with the blogger (e-mail, comments, Twitter, et cetera). If the blog was authored by more than one blogger, the personal characteristics of the lead blogger were analyzed, if available. The complete codebook with coding categories and instructions is available upon request from the authors.

To assess what type of content was produced, for every blog ten individual political blog posts were analyzed.

TOPIC. To determine the political topic or subject of a blog post, coders were asked to determine the central topic of the post and assign the post to one of the following categories: Economy and finance; Justice, law and legal; Social affairs; Health care; Traffic and infrastructure; Nature and environment; Education; Foreign policy and foreign countries; Integration and religion; Art and culture. It was also possible to assign the category 'Political process' in case the topic was subordinate to the focus on the political process or actor, which for example is the case during campaigns or personal conflicts between political actors. For example: if a blog post discussed a personal or ideological conflict between two political parties, which concerned a policy

decision on health care, then 'Political process' was coded, not 'Health'. In some cases 'Non-political topic' could be coded, as the inclusion criterion for blog posts was that political actors or issues were 'mentioned'. In case a political actor was only mentioned as an example, or if a political actor was discussed unrelated to any political topic, than Non-political topic was coded. Coders were allowed to code also a second or third topic if more topics were featured. Per topic it was also assessed which political 'level' was involved: local, domestic or international politics.

ORIGINAL CONTENT. Coders noted whether the blogger relied primarily on news or information from other news media for their blog posts. This was measured by coding the first three hyperlinks from every post and indicating if they referred to mainstream news sources or not. Second, by looking at explicit source references and layout changes, coders indicated if posts consisted primarily (50% or more) of content that was taken from external websites, such as mainstream news sites. Coders further checked whether the blog posts contained journalistic research features, such as interviews (conducted by the blogger), direct or indirect quotes from other people about a political topic; segments of text that were based on or accompanied by some form of research documentation or descriptions of events the blogger said to have physically attended and that related to a political topic.

INTENTIONS. To find out to what extent blogs serve as political or media watchdogs, every post was checked for the presence of criticism of politics or of news media. If the post contained political criticism, it was also checked if that criticism was targeted towards specific individuals ('ad hominem') or towards groups, organizations or politics 'in general'. Further, coders assessed whether the blogger in his posts explicitly tried to politically mobilize his visitors, for example by calling for political action, convincing the reader vote for certain parties or to sign petitions. To gauge the extent of personal and opinionated content on blogs, for every blog it was indicated whether it was written in first-person ("I think that...", "He told me...") and whether it contained personal opinion about one of the political topics, by coding the presence of personal evaluations and the use of evaluative words.

INTERACTIVITY AND HYPERLINKS. The degree of interactivity was measured by checking the availability and actual use (amount of comments, unique comments and participation of the blog author) of the comments function on the blog. Second, the presence of contact options (e-mail, social network profile, Twitter, instant messaging, postal address, Contact form, phone,

guestbook and discussion forum) was coded. To measure the degree of interactivity by using hyperlinks to external websites, the presence and nature (link to mainstream media or not) of external links in the blog posts were coded.

CODING PROCEDURES AND RELIABILITY. Apart from the researchers, three extra coders participated in a pilot coding procedure. Because of the lengthy codebook and exploratory nature of the study, coders were trained five days full-time. The first author and two of the extra coders from the pilot study conducted the final analysis. Both from the blog posts and the blog pages, 10% was selected for the final reliability tests. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's alpha. Intercoder reliability scores for manifest blog elements (e.g., presence of multimedia, number of comments, presence of first-person) was good and varied between $\alpha = .79$ and $\alpha = 1.00$; scores for 'latent' content that required interpretation from the coders, ranged between $\alpha = .52$ and $\alpha = .74^2$. Although Krippendorff's alpha is a conservative measure, we will take lower scores into account in our results section.

RESULTS

WHO BLOGS?

The majority of political blogs (88%, $n = 102$) from which the number of authors could be identified ($n = 116$) is single-authored. Around 37% of all bloggers does not write more than one blog post per week, while 17% blogs once per day or even more. At the time the blogs were archived, 65% of the blogs had been online for at least a year and 28% more than three years.

The demographic composition (RQ1) of the bloggers reveals that from the 112 lead bloggers that provided gender-information, 85% is male (see Table 1). Regarding bloggers whose age was mentioned or could be deducted ($n = 75$), we find that half of them are between 41 and 60 years old. Looking at bloggers of whom both age and gender is known ($n = 75$), we find that 24% of this group is a male person in the age category 41-50, followed by almost 19% of male bloggers in the group 51-60 years old.

Around half (53%) of the bloggers seems to use their real names, 39% displays a recognizable photo of himself or herself and almost everybody (97%) offers one or more options to get in touch (e-mail address, contact form etc.). It is uncommon to report information about one's education, profession

or ethnic background. Of the 36 bloggers that reported their level of education, all except two said they had finished some form of higher education.

Table 1 Gender and age of political bloggers

Characteristics	%	n
Gender		
Male	85	95
Female	15	17
Age-category		
10-20	3	2
21-30	21	16
31-40	15	11
41-50	32	24
51-60	19	14
61-70	9	7
71-80	1	1

Note. Totals do not add up to 162 because not for all bloggers age or gender could be determined.

THE CONTENT OF BLOGS

TOPIC. A wide variety of political topics are discussed on blogs about institutional politics (Table 2). Popular topic categories are economy and finance, traffic and infrastructure and foreign policy and foreign countries (RQ2). However, the main focus of most blog posts is the political process – not topic-related: conflicts between political actors, internal party politics, campaigning, elections, the political system and the functioning of democracy. In those posts, political issues (e.g., financial crisis, environmental policies) are merely used for illustration. Most political topics deal with the Dutch national (domestic) level. However, blog posts about traffic and infrastructure or political issues about art and culture are mostly discussed on the local political level.

Table 2 Topics on political blogs

	% of topics in all posts	Most popular topic (aggregated on blog level)	Dominant political level
Political process	35	50	Domestic
Economy and finance	13	12	Domestic
Traffic and infrastructure	8	9	Local
Foreign policy & foreign countries	9	8	International
Nature and environment	5	5	Domestic
Integration and religion	7	5	Domestic
Justice, law and legal	7	4	Domestic
Social affairs	6	3	Domestic
Health care	3	2	Domestic
Art and culture	2	1	Local
Other political subject	.2	1	
Education	1	0	Domestic
Non-political	4	0	

Note. The total number of blog posts is n=1,620, the total number of coded topics n=1,804.

ORIGINAL CONTENT. Our findings show that political blogs heavily rely on external information sources by using content from mainstream news media or providing hyperlinks to other sites, while not publishing much content of their own (Table 3). This seems true even if we take the comparatively lower intercoder reliability scores in this case into account (see endnote 2). It seems to be unusual for bloggers to engage in journalistic research activities: conducting interviews, quoting others, describing events or experiences or adding documents, links to databases or to party websites (RQ3). The small share of blogs that did regularly engage in journalistic activities usually focused on *local* political issues.

More than half (54%) of the blogs contained at least one post out of ten that consisted of more than 50% 'external' content: information that was – in

most cases – copied from mainstream news media (RQ3). A fifth of all blogs used this type of content in at least half of their blog posts. Analyses of the use and nature of hyperlinks shows a mixed pattern, showing that some bloggers (17%) did not use hyperlinks at all, some bloggers direct most of their links to mainstream news media sites (34%), while 49% of the bloggers direct the majority of their links to non-mainstream news sites.

INTENTIONS. Bloggers express political criticism, either directed at specific politicians (*ad hominem*) or in more general terms (RQ4). Most bloggers criticize politics at least once in ten posts, and a smaller group even does this in most cases (Table 3). Surprisingly, attacking or criticizing *media* is not common. Also, blogs rarely contain explicit politically mobilizing information, such as calling upon visitors to vote for certain parties, to sign online petitions or to attend demonstrations. The majority of bloggers primarily writes in the first person singular or plural (I, me, ours), and in almost all cases a personal opinion on the political issue(s) of the blog post was expressed. Again, this seems to hold even though intercoder reliability was not as high in this case as otherwise.

Table 3 Original content and intentions on political blogs

	Mean scores (0-10)	At least in 1 out of 10 posts (%)	In 5 or more posts (%)
<i>Original content</i>			
Experience	0.94	40	6
Documentation	1.23	45	7
Interview	0.05	4	0
Quoting	0.40	24	1
> 50% of post not-original	2.23	54	20
<i>Intentions</i>			
Political criticism, ad hominem	1.92	65	12
Political criticism, general/group	2.80	76	24
Media criticism	0.34	26	0
Political mobilization	0.36	18	2
First person	4.70	79	53
Personal opinion	6.34	90	70

Note. N = 162.

INTERACTIVITY. Analysis of the interactive and communication features (RQ5) shows that providing contact details and hyperlinking (see above) is very common. Providing an e-mail address (41%) was the most popular, followed by contact form (16%) and Twitter (16%).

Surprisingly, the most typical interactive blog feature – the comment option – was rarely used. Although the option was enabled on 91% of all blogs, the actual presence of comments was low: 62% of all coded posts had no comments and only 14% received five comments or more; 62% of all blogs did not receive a single comment in the ten blog posts that were analyzed, respectively. In 41% of all blog posts where there were comments, the blogger himself was one of the participants.

CHARACTERIZING POLITICAL BLOGGERS: LOCAL ACTIVISTS, COLUMNISTS AND FILTER BLOGGERS. So far, our findings have provided some general characteristics of

political blogs: journalistic research activities are not very common; blogs are personal and contain opinionated content; political criticism is common but media criticism is not. This does not exclude that underneath this general pattern, we find specific groups of bloggers. To discern political blogger types (RQ6), a Ward's linkage cluster analysis (see Appendix B) of the main blog characteristics was performed. Three almost equally-sized clusters were identified, for which the means are shown in Table 4.

The blogs in the first cluster (n=53) are characterized by a focus on domestic (national) politics. More often than on average, they contain criticisms of politicians, politics in general and of mainstream media. The style is also more personal and opinionated. We label this group "columnists." The second cluster of blogs (n=50) is also opinionated, but is further characterized by a focus on local rather than national politics. These blogs also include more material of their own, such as describing the authors' experiences and or quoting other people, and they link more to non-mainstream sites than the blogs in other clusters. Blogs in this cluster also contain more mobilizing attempts, so we label their authors "local activists." The blogs in the third cluster (n=59) focus more often on international politics and do not perform much own research or contain a personal or opinionated style. These blogs rather provide readers with hyperlinks to other mainstream media and, more than others, publish content from other sites on their own blogs. These are labeled "filter bloggers," using the terminology from blog literature.

Table 4 Values blog variables per cluster

	Cluster 1 (n=53)		Cluster 2 (n=50)		Cluster 3 (n=59)		Total (N=162)	
	"Columnist"		"Local activists"		"Filter blogger"		All <i>bloggers</i>	
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE
Local politics	1.1	0.28	5.9	0.57	1.0	0.21	2.5	0.28
Domestic politics	8.3	0.48	4.0	0.56	4.4	0.43	5.5	0.32
International politics	3.8	0.43	2.1	0.41	6.3	0.42	4.2	0.28
Links to non-mainstream media	3.4	0.52	8.5	1.00	4.9	0.63	5.5	0.45
Links to mainstream media	4.0	0.67	3.1	0.53	5.1	0.65	4.1	0.37
Quotes	0.2	0.07	0.9	0.18	0.1	0.05	0.4	0.07
Interviews	0.0	0.00	0.2	0.07	0.0	0.00	0.0	0.02
Experiences	0.4	0.09	2.2	0.35	0.4	0.11	0.9	0.13
Documentation	0.7	0.17	1.9	0.3	1.2	0.23	1.2	0.14
Mobilization	0.1	0.06	0.9	0.28	0.1	0.04	0.4	0.09
Media criticism	0.6	0.11	0.2	0.09	0.2	0.06	0.3	0.05
Political criticism (ad hominem)	3.6	0.34	1.4	0.22	0.8	0.15	1.9	0.17
Political criticism (general)	4.7	0.38	2.8	0.33	1.1	0.18	2.8	0.21
Use of first-person	6.3	0.45	5.9	0.45	2.3	0.37	4.7	0.28
Personal opinion	8.8	0.20	6.4	0.46	4.0	0.45	6.3	0.27
Using external content	0.6	0.13	1.5	0.31	4.4	0.51	2.2	0.25
Post frequency (logged)	1.8	0.15	1.8	0.16	2.5	0.20	2.0	0.10

Note. The mean values for the variables in each cluster that are higher than the overall mean, are highlighted in bold. The theoretical range for all variables is 0-10, except for local, domestic and international politics and non-mainstream and mainstream links (0-30) and post frequency (1-∞).

DISCUSSION

Hopes that political blogs may give hitherto silent citizens a voice and may supplement or even substitute traditional journalism have been attenuated already somewhat whenever they were investigated empirically. Our study has confirmed and extended this evidence in a large-scale and representative content analysis of political blogs in The Netherlands. Yes, in most cases political bloggers are men, with a dominance of people between forty and

sixty years old – in this respect closely resembling the dominance of older men found in professional journalism in the Netherlands (Deuze, 2002).

We further saw that most political bloggers indeed use an opinionated and personal publication style and make ample use of links to other websites. Most bloggers do not produce much original content, but instead rely on information from mainstream media. But underneath this general picture, we have identified three types of political citizen bloggers, with the group of “local activists” the closest to typical journalistic activities: They are more active in gathering and providing original information than the other groups, such as quoting other people or reporting on experiences. However, this is true only for a third of the bloggers in our sample.

Our findings strongly confirm that traditional journalism is far from being replaced by a mass of voluntary amateur reporters, coming from all strata of society. Neither, and reassuringly, do fears seem justified that political bloggers engage in anonymous digital scolding and that political blogs on a large scale shamelessly steal content without crediting the original source. Many bloggers use their real name, offer contact options and use hyperlinks to refer to their sources. A large number of those hyperlinks direct users to the websites of mainstream news media.

Our findings clearly suggest that political blogs do not seem to replace traditional outlets, but rather have a complementary function. They lard original media content with their own comments and opinion – not unimportant because it may serve as a safety valve. To put it cynically: People chatting about politics may not be dangerous for established political structures.

How can we explain the both disappointingly low and fairly conventional political participation in blogs – at least compared to the hopes that authors like Gillmor (2004) expressed? One major reason comes to mind: People are cost-benefit conscious – as in the uses-and-gratifications approach to communication behavior (e.g., Blumler & Katz, 1974). As long as they believe that the political system is working sufficiently well and that professional communication channels do their job well enough, there is no urgent need to spend hours on finding new information and trying to get the authorities to do something. Typically, a functioning representative democracy and a professional journalist should take care of public affairs. An exception, of course, could be those citizens for whom participation in politics always was fascinating and rewarding. But for a cost-benefit conscious audience, the

mere availability of technical devices to participate in the public discourse is not that important, for them technological determinism does not work. New technology may lower the threshold that in former times typing a letter to the editor, finding an envelope, buying a stamp and walking by a mailbox may have symbolized. But as long as an urgent incentive is missing, even lower thresholds may not make people participate (see also Schudson, 1999).

Of course, there are caveats in our study: We defined politics as involving political functionaries, organizations, institutions, and processes. This is actually a wider definition than it may seem at first sight. Environmental issues, arts, culture, animals, traffic, uncivilized behavior – juts to name a few topics – become immediately political in our analysis, once a politician, a party or the government is called into action or criticized for not doing anything.

And maybe political citizen journalism is still in its infancy and will develop soon to be the mass movement – also in Western democracies – that Gillmor (2004) dreamed of. But even today, the technical threshold for participation is already very low. Internet penetration in a country such as the Netherlands could hardly be higher (94% in 2011), and other popular platforms (Twitter, Facebook) are not widely used for political purposes as well (Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegthart, & De Vreese, 2011; see also chapter 2).

In the next chapter, we will take another specific look at political citizen bloggers. By combining the findings from this content analysis with survey data about bloggers' habits, beliefs and practices, we aim at providing a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon of political blogging by citizens.

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APPENDIX A

List of Keywords for Initial Sampling of Political Blogs

The keyword list was composed by selecting popular and often-recurring keywords in a purposive sample of political blogs, supplemented by keywords that the researchers expected to lead to political blogs. For all nouns, both the single and plural form were used.

Keywords

- politics; politician; citizen, government; Political party; elections; the law; democracy
- mayor; bench of Mayor and Aldermen; alderman (governor/administrator in a city);
- minister, secretary of state, prime minister, president; Upper chamber, Lower House, European Union; European Parliament; United Nations
- the names of all Dutch national political parties: CDA, GroenLinks, PvdA, SP, D66, VVD, ChristenUnie, Partij voor de Dieren, Trots op Nederland, SGP, PVV

APPENDIX B

Ward's linkage cluster analysis of political blogs

no. of clusters	Duda-Hart values		Cluster sizes (n)					
	Je(2)/Je(1)	pseudo-T ²	1	2	3	4	5	6
2	0.8693	15.19	103	59				
3	0.8315	9.73	53	50	59			
4	0.8162	9.46	53	44	6	59		
5	0.7917	4.99	53	28	16	6	59	
6	0.6676	2.94	53	28	16	6	25	34

Note. Possible cluster solutions, N=162. The solutions with the most distinct clustering have relatively large Je(2)/Je(1) values and smaller pseudo-T-squared values. Using this rule of thumb, while at the same time maintaining an interpretable number of cases per cluster, a three-factor solution was deemed most appropriate.

NOTES

¹ After entering the generic search term 'politiek' [politics] in Technorati (result: 650 blogs containing the search term) and Google Blog Search (result: 269,500 blog posts containing 'politiek'), it may safely be assumed that there are at least hundreds of Dutch blogs in the realm of politics.

² The software ReCal was used to calculate reliability measures (Freelon, 2010). The following alpha scores were obtained: number of authors .95; age, .62; gender .97; education .89, real name .93; photo of blogger .82; contact form .97; e-mail .98; forum 1.0; phone number 1.0; guestbook .85; instant messaging .92; comments allowed .98; number of comments 1.0; number of commenters .95; participation of author in comments .79; documentation .59; experience .57; media criticism .59; political criticism ad-hominem .74; political criticism general .64; interview 1.0; hyperlinks .94; mobilization .69; original content .71; personal opinion .52; personal style .79; topic .69. To calculate the intercoder reliability of topic, only the first coded topic was used. Possible coder disagreements could therefore also have occurred because coders used a different order of topics in blog posts that contained more than one topic.

Chapter 5

Political citizen bloggers: Who, how and why?*

* An earlier version is currently under review.

Because of the low threshold for citizens to be active on the Internet, more participatory forms of journalism have been hoped for (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Gillmor, 2004). Using weblogs, Twitter and social networks, ordinary citizens are now able to engage in public discussions, express their opinions on political issues and publish information that is not covered in mainstream media. Particularly weblogs are considered to have substantial impact on the realm of politics (Feld & Wilcox, 2008; Hewitt, 2005; Kline & Burnstein, 2005). Despite the enthusiasm about political citizen journalism and political blogs, “academic research has yet to fully unpack the notion of blogging as a journalistic practice” (Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2011, p. 587). While many argue that blogs have much political influence and create a challenge for professional journalism, large-scale content analyses demonstrate that most bloggers publish personal opinions (e.g., Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Papacharissi, 2007). However, it has also been argued that blogs are an alternative form of journalism (Matheson, 2004). In general, not much is known yet about who is blogging, how people blog and why people blog about politics.

What do we really know about the characteristics of bloggers? A somewhat dated but large-scale PEW study revealed that bloggers are evenly split with regard to gender and that they are young and racially diverse (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). But when it comes to blogging about ‘external events’, mostly related to politics and current affairs, Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, and Wright (2004) concluded from a large-scale content analysis that men are more likely to blog than women. Similarly, Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, and Soon (2009) found that ‘non-personal’ bloggers are more often men, better educated and older than ‘personal’ bloggers. Also most of the so-called political A-list bloggers seem to be older white men with a high education (Harp & Tremayne, 2006; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005), in this respect not differing much from professional journalists and political pundits in most Western countries (Deuze, 2002; Hindman, 2009).

Despite the seemingly skewed distribution in terms of sociodemographic characteristics, blogging has blurred the boundaries between producer and audience, or between amateur and professional. Therefore, blogging practices have often been compared to or discussed in light of ‘traditional’ journalism. Sure, the key characteristics of blogs and bloggers obviously are their personal and opinionated tone (Domingo & Heinonen, 2005; Rodzvilla,

2002) and their reliance on mainstream media as sources instead of providing original information (Kenix, 2009; Lee & Jeong, 2007; Messner & Distaso, 2008; Wallsten, 2007). However, although formal ethic codes are often absent (Perlmutter & Schoen, 2007), self-imposed rules and norms can be found among bloggers (Kuhn, 2007; Viégas, 2005) while also valuing general principles such as telling the truth and crediting sources (Cenite et al., 2009). Despite these observations, little is known about political bloggers' main information sources and their identification with the term citizen journalist.

REASONS FOR KEEPING A POLITICAL BLOG

The ability to voice political¹ support or criticism has been named as an important reason to blog (Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung, & Perlmutter, 2010; Feld & Wilcox, 2008; Gillmor, 2004; Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009; McKenna, 2007). Before the Internet citizens were highly dependent on mainstream media and professional journalists to get heard, but with blogs everyone has the ability to express his or her political support or criticism. McKenna (2007) showed that indeed some political blogs in the U.S. are clearly positioning themselves as 'policy blogs' and try to bring certain politic areas and policy recommendations to the attention of political actors and the public. Blogging for political reasons has not only received much attention during U.S. election periods (Perlmutter, 2008), but also for example in countries with less democratic regimes (Loewenstein, 2008).

Other bloggers seem to be driven by a combination of political and journalistic reasons. Following the public and citizen journalism movements, these blogs aim at providing either criticism or even an alternative to mainstream media (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008). Ultimately, having better mainstream media or more diverse alternatives would be beneficial for society. In this vein, Ekdale et al. (2010) reported that popular political bloggers found it important to 'to provide an alternative perspective to the mainstream media.' A popular category of blogs are the so-called media watchblogs (Glaser, 2004). Scott (2007), in a content analysis of four popular U.S. political blogs, found that they rarely did original reporting or function as alternative sources, but rather were actually "activist media pundits." Particularly in the U.S., such blogs are found to be able to influence mainstream media (Hayes, 2008; Perlmutter, 2008). Despite the various examples of famous political blogs whose aim it is to correct, complement or

compete with mainstream media, it has been noted that relatively little is known about the prominence of such motives among ordinary citizens who blog about politics (Kenix, 2009). Therefore, this will be the focus of this study.

Besides strictly political reasons, citizens certainly have personal reasons. Studies that have tapped into the reasons for blogging, for example found that people look for communication and interaction with their audience (e.g., Baker & Moore, 2010; Huang, Shen, Lin, & Chang, 2007; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Schwartz, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002), blog to express feelings and emotions (Huang et al., 2007; Liu, Liao, & Zeng, 2007; Nardi et al., 2004; Papacharissi, 2002) or to ‘think by writing’ or document one’s ideas (Nardi et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2007). For example, studying blogs in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, Macias et al. (2009) found that besides expressing political opinions, communication was a key motivation, because blogs enabled them to call for help or look for missing persons. Also Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2011) found political blogging can be personal. They found that perceiving one’s blog as ‘journalistic’ positively predicted the motivation to express oneself (e.g., creative expression, documenting personal experiences).

THE AIMS OF THIS STUDY

All in all, we could see that the evidence about political blogging by ordinary citizens is scarce, to say the least (see also Ekdale et al., 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2011; Wallsten, 2008). Further, most studies had to rely on very small (convenience) samples or secondary data, and in most cases only took into account U.S. or English-language blogs. In this study, we take a comprehensive approach and describe and explain political citizen bloggers’ characteristics, practices, perceptions and reasons. Our study is exploratory in nature, given the voids in the research on this topic. Using original survey data from a comparatively large group of political citizen bloggers, our study therefore aims to shed light on the main characteristics and the practices and perceptions of ordinary citizens who blog about politics.

The following research questions emerge from our analysis of the literature and guide our study:

RQ1. What are the characteristics of political bloggers in terms of sociodemographics, news media use, and political attitudes and participation?

RQ2. What are the blog practices of bloggers? More specifically, we are interested in their blog frequency, their blogging experience, the importance of political posts, the geographic level of politics they focus on and their main information sources.

RQ3. What roles do political bloggers ascribe to? Do they perceive themselves as engaged citizens, as citizen journalists or even as journalists?

RQ4. Do bloggers perceive their blogs to be effective in terms of influencing politics, media or their personal lives?

RQ5. What reasons for blogging do political bloggers have?

METHOD

FIELDWORK

In April 2011, 102 bloggers were invited by e-mail to fill out an online questionnaire. The bloggers were identified based on the list of blogs that were part of a content analysis conducted in 2009 (see chapter 4). This method was chosen because the extensive blog sampling process from this study would maximize the chances that the invited bloggers were part of our target group: ordinary citizens who regularly blog about politics². After three reminders in the following three months, 71 bloggers filled out the survey, yielding a response rate of 70%. Four respondents did not finish the survey, but provided sufficient central questions to be included in the study.

The Netherlands as a research area for political blogs is relevant from various perspectives. First, The Netherlands has the highest Internet access rate (94%) in the European Union (Seybert, 2011), thus allowing virtually everyone to start a blog. Second, the increase in political and societal polarization has turned The Netherlands into fertile ground for political discussion (Boomkens, 2010; Oosterwaal & Torenvlied, 2010). Third, even up until today there is ongoing debate about the strained and undefined relationship between bloggers and citizen journalists on the one hand and mainstream media on the other (e.g., Bardoel, 2010; Costera Meijer & Arendsen, 2010; Pleijter, 2011). Additionally, focusing on the Dutch situation addresses the critical observation that most blog studies are carried out in a U.S. setting or of English language blogs (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, & Sapp, 2006), while blogging practices outside the U.S. may be different (Pedersen, 2007).

MEASURES

SOCIODEMOGRAPHICS. The following sociodemographics were recorded: gender; age (in years), education (7 categories, dummy-coded to low and high); occupation (high school student/student; freelancer; in employment; self-employed; (temporarily) unemployed; retired; disabled; also dummy-coded to employed versus non-employed) and the professional sector they worked in (Craft; Finances; Communication, PR and market research; Retail and wholesale; Health industry; Industry; ICT; Journalism; Legal; Logistics and transport; Education & training; Research (R&D) and Science; Politics and public administration; Tourism and catering).

POLITICAL VARIABLES. Political cynicism was measured with two items ($\alpha = .80$), asking respondents to which extent they agreed (7-point scale, ranging between completely disagree and completely agree, reverse-coded) with the following statements: (1) Regardless of who forms the government, in general I am satisfied with the way democracy works in the Netherlands; (2) In general, I am satisfied with the way politics works in my municipality. Political orientation was measured on an 11-point scale with the statement: "When political orientation is concerned, people usually talk about 'left' and 'right'. Could you indicate on the scale below where you would position yourself?" Party preference was measured by asking which political party respondents would vote for if elections would be held the next day. Political participation was measured by asking how often (Never; Max. once per year; A few times per year; Around once per month; More than once per month) people engaged in the following activities: Sending letters to the media; Speaking or commenting at municipality meetings; Write articles for a local paper; Hand out political flyers; Participate in demonstration; Organize petitions or gather signatures; Attend political lectures, debates or manifestations; Contact politics or government for expressing criticism or support; Sign digital petitions or signature lists. Two index scales were formed: one with the number of total and one with the number of offline activities the respondent engaged in at least once per year.

NEWS MEDIA AND PARTICIPATORY MEDIA USE. News use was measured with an 8 point-scale (0-7 days per week), by asking respondents how often they: read newspapers; watched TV news and current affairs; listened to radio news; read or watched news on the Internet.

The use of participatory media was measured, using the same 8-point scale, with five consumption activities (Reading political tweets; Reading comments about politics; Reading forums about politics; Following political activities on social network sites; Reading personal blogs about politics) and four participation activities (Writing political tweets; Writing comments about politics; Participating on forums about politics; Participating in political activities on social network sites).

BLOGGING PRACTICES. Respondents were asked which percentage of their blog posts they considered to contain political content (0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100%) and on which geographical level of politics they focused: local/regional politics; national politics or international politics. We further asked them how often they blogged, including maintenance and research (Less than once per month; Once per month; Once every two weeks; Once a week; 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 days per week) and whether they blogged completely alone, mainly alone but with occasional contributions from others or in a group. The latter two categories were collapsed into one category to differentiate between purely single-authored blogs and blogs written by more than one person.

EFFECTIVENESS. To shed light on the perceived effectiveness of blogging (RQ4), we asked respondents how often (never; seldom; regularly; often) their blog: affected local politics; affected national politics; led to relevant contacts; led to speaking and writing invitations; was cited or used by other media; was cited or used by other blogs.

REASONS. To answer RQ5, we measured the reasons people have for blogging. Respondents were presented with two batteries of items (based on previous research) and, using a 7-point scale, asked how important and applicable they were. The first battery of items was based on the variety of reasons for blogging that has been suggested in existing blogging literature. The second battery, based on Deuze (2002), gauged how important a set of specifically traditional journalistic goals were (see Appendix B).

Besides the specific reasons, we gauged the intrinsic motivation to blog – i.e., the perceived enjoyment – compared to the extrinsic motivation – i.e., the perceived usefulness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Using a 7-point scale, respondents were asked to rate two statements: “I blog because it actually leads to something/delivers results” (extrinsic) and “I blog because I find the act of writing blog articles a pleasant activity” (intrinsic).

ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES. We asked which of the following roles applied (0=no, 1=yes) to them: journalist; citizen journalist; columnists; public

diary writer; political commentator; engaged citizen; other (namely...). We further asked what the main information sources were for their political blog posts (more answers allowed): Own knowledge and experiences; Family, friends and colleagues; News media; Personal blogs from others; Personal contacts with official and politicians; Other sources (open question).

RESULTS

CHARACTERISTICS OF BLOGGERS

For our first research question (RQ1), we examined the characteristics of political bloggers. Political bloggers are in most cases male (85%), fall into older age categories (55% is between 41 and 60 years old, $M = 48.6$, $SD = 13.1$) and have followed some form of higher education (88%). They are dispersed over a variety of professional groups, with training and education (20%), journalism (18%), politics (12%) and research and academia (8%) as the most popular categories. Most bloggers are (self-)employed (79%), the rest is dispersed over the categories retired, student, unemployed or disabled.

On average, bloggers lean somewhat to the political left ($M = 4.3$ on a 1-11 scale, $SD = 2.8$), with 21% placing themselves on the very left end of the spectrum. This tendency is reflected in their party choice, with green party GroenLinks ranking as the most popular one (25% would vote for this party if elections would be held the next day) and socialist party SP as the third most important (14%). Social-liberal party D66 is the second most popular (20%). On average, political bloggers are not very cynical about politics ($M = 3.9$ on a 7-point scale, $SD = 1.8$).

Political bloggers are avid news consumers (Table 1), with online news being the number-one source (on average six days per week). Also the passive use of 'participatory' platforms is relatively frequent.

In order to bring the absolute numbers into perspective, we compared the results with comparative survey data from December 2009 gathered amongst a large and representative sample of the Dutch population (see chapter 2). The means and percentages are shown in the last two columns (Table 1). Comparing the means using t-tests reveals that political bloggers are significantly more avid news consumers (except for radio and television news) and users of participatory media. Further, they are less cynical about

politics than non-bloggers and they lean more to the political left than the rest of the population.

Concerning bloggers' offline political participation – such as participating in demonstrations or signing petitions – we find that, on average, they participate in three of the seven activities. Only ten percent indicated not to engage in any of the activities. If the two online political activities (contacting politicians online; signing digital petitions or signature lists) were included, only one respondent indicated that he or she did not participate at all.

Table 1 Political and media characteristics Dutch political bloggers

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mpop</i> ^a	<i>SDpop</i>
Political variables ^b				
Political orientation	4.3	2.8	5.9	2.2
Political cynicism	3.9	1.8	4.2	1.3
News consumption ^c				
Newspaper	4.3	2.5	3.0	2.8
Radio news	3.4	3.0	3.3	2.7
TV news (current affairs and news broadcasts)	4.6	2.4	4.1	2.5
Online news	6.0	2.0	2.6	2.8
Participatory platforms				
	% ^d		% ^d	
Reading political tweets	60		0,8	
Reading comments about politics	90		8	
Reading forums about politics	60		3	
Following political activities on social network sites	58		2	
Reading personal blogs about politics	82		1	
Writing political tweets	57		0,3	
Writing comments about politics	70		0,9	
Participating on forums about politics	42		0,5	
Participating in political activities on social network sites	57		0,7	

Note. N=67.

^a For the figures in this column, respondents that had indicated to blog about politics were excluded. N = 2,057. ^b Political orientation is measured with a scale from 1-11 and political cynicism with a 1-7 scale. ^c News consumption is measured in days per week. ^d % saying at least once a week.

BLOGGING PRACTICES

With regard to blogging practices (RQ2), we find that most bloggers have quite some experience with blogging, with an average of almost six years of

blog experience ($M = 5.8$, $SD = 3.4$), with 18 percent even blogging nine years or more. Blogging is primarily done on one's own (75%). Only some bloggers sometimes get contributions from others (14%) or are active in a group blog (11%). Blogging frequency varies a lot, with one third being very active (34% blogs between five and seven days per week) and around one third being not so active (31% blogs less than once a week). While two thirds of the blogs do not receive more than 5,000 visitors per month, 11% indicates to have more than 10,000 monthly visitors, with two blogs receiving 130,000 and 200,000 visitors respectively. Domestic politics is the type of politics most blogs focus on (51%), followed by local/regional politics (30%) and international politics (19%).

News media are the most important information source for bloggers (91%), followed by bloggers' own knowledge and experiences (64%). But also a third of the bloggers (34%) indicates that personal contacts with officials and politicians are an important information source.

ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND EFFECTIVENESS

With regard to role perceptions (RQ3), we find that a fifth of the bloggers says the description *citizen journalist* applies to them (20%). Around 23% of the bloggers indicates that the role *journalist* applies, but only two thirds of these bloggers, when asked about their profession, in the survey indicate that they really work in journalism. Most bloggers indicate that the description *engaged citizen* applies to them (61%).

Asked about the perceived effectiveness of their blog (RQ4), many bloggers indicate that their content is picked up by other blogs or that it leads to relevant personal contacts (Table 2). However, only a small percentage of the bloggers thinks that their blog affects local or national politics on a regular basis.

Table 2 Perceived effectiveness of blogging

My blog...	%	SD
Is cited or used by other blogs	61	.49
Leads to relevant contacts	56	.50
Leads to speaking and writing invitations	32	.47
Is cited or used by other media	27	.45
Affects local politics	27	.45
Affect national politics	15	.36

Note. N=71. The percentages reported are the respondents saying *regularly* or *often*.

REASONS

Overall, we see that all reasons to blog (RQ5) received relatively high scores (Table 3): Almost all reasons obtain a score that is above the mean of the scale (3.0). Further, the results suggest that covering subjects/topics that receive too little attention from mainstream media is a very important reason for blogging, as well as stirring discussion and critically examining public officials and businesses. Blogging to give other people a chance to express their views, or blogging for entertainment, are deemed least important. However, even for these last categories 28% and 33% of the respondents finds these goals “(very) important”.

Table 3 Mean scores of specific blogging reasons

	M	SD	% im- portant
Cover subjects that get too little attention from mainstream media	3.9	1.07	73
Initiate and develop discussions	3.9	.91	72
Be an adversary of public officials and businesses	3.8	1.03	76
Provide analysis and interpretation	3.7	1.02	67
Organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing	3.7	1.10	69
Trying to affect public opinion	3.6	1.22	68
Have an influence on the public/political agenda	3.6	1.17	63
Criticize specific political policies	3.5	1.17	61
Signal unbalanced media coverage	3.5	1.13	55
Develop intellectual/cultural interests of the public	3.4	1.14	55
Signal mistakes in the media	3.3	1.07	49
Investigate claims of the government	3.3	1.13	54
Stand up for the disadvantaged	3.3	1.29	54
Inform others about the things I do	3.3	1.19	52
Get news to the public quickly	3.2	1.21	42
Criticize certain political parties or ideologies	3.1	1.34	45
Signaling new trends	3.1	1.25	49
Working feelings and thoughts out of my system	3.0	1.26	41
Get in touch with other people	2.9	1.08	31
Support specific political policies	2.9	1.32	41
Support certain political parties or ideologies	2.8	1.40	35
Provide entertainment	2.8	1.24	33
Give people a chance to express their views	2.6	1.28	28

Note. All questions were measured with 1-5 scales. The percentage in the last column is the percentage of respondents answering “important” or “very important”. Number of respondents varies between 67 and 71 because some surveys were not fully completed.

Factor analysis (principal axis factoring with varimax rotation) shows that seven general ‘blogging reasons’ can be identified (see Appendix for factor matrix): support and criticize politics (3 items, $\alpha = .80$); influence public and public opinion (3 items, $\alpha = .67$); serve as a platform for (disadvantaged) others (2 items; $\alpha = .66$); research and scrutinize politics (2 items, $\alpha = .68$);

inform the audience (1 item); signal mistakes in the media (1); organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing (1 item). The mean scores of the blogging reasons are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4 Mean scores of general blogging reasons

	M	SD
Organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing	3.69	1.10
Influence public and public opinion	3.59	0.87
Research and scrutinize politics	3.55	0.94
Signal mistakes in the media	3.32	1.07
Inform the audience	3.25	1.19
Support and criticize politics	2.95	1.14
Serve as a platform for (disadvantaged) others	2.92	1.11

Note. Ranges are between 1 and 5. Number of respondents varies between 67 and 71 because some surveys were not fully completed.

The wide variety of important blogging reasons is also reflected in the answers to the open-ended question, which preceded the closed-ended ones and asked what the respondents' reasons for blogging were. Moreover, the answers provide more detail on the primary causes, on the translation of blogging reasons into blogging practice and sometimes even on the perceived effectiveness. For example, one critical blogger reported:

“Through my blog(s) I try to keep alert (mainly) local politics. And it works. (...) From the responses and comments from local politicians it appears they actually take into account my commentary. (...) My influence sometimes reaches so far that politicians run into troubles.”

Another blogger indicated to blog to inform his readers about politics and stated “I started blogging to give signals to society about corruption, place-hunting and political lies from our representatives from the city, province and country”, and another responded “As a volunteer in my neighborhood, I cover, on a daily basis, local news and experiences as a service to local residents”. For many, blogging is a way of release, or as one respondent stated: “[my blog is a] safety valve for a voice crying in the wilderness”. Various respondents found it important to blog because in this way they could supplement or correct mainstream media. One respondent stated:

“Information about Venezuela can only be found sporadically in the media, and in the case there actually was news coverage, I thought it was not reflected properly. Of course one can start complaining, but if you don’t come into action, you don’t have the right to complain.”

Some bloggers keep a blog to inform other people about their work or professional expertise in order to gain publicity and attention, while others seem to keep a blog for more personal reasons (“lay ideas down in writing” or “writing exercise”).

In addition, we compared the mean scores of the intrinsic ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.66$) and extrinsic motivation items ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.78$). This difference is significantly different ($t(65)=4.68$, $p = .001$) and thus reveals that bloggers are, although both scores are relatively high, more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated.

Is there a pattern of who blogs why? We briefly explore whether certain sociodemographic (age, gender, education and employment) and political characteristics (cynicism, orientation and political participation) are able to predict the importance bloggers ascribe to certain blogging reasons. Therefore, regression analyses were performed using the specific blogging reasons as dependent variables. As the results show (Table 5), some results stand out. For example, bloggers who do not have a paid job and bloggers with a higher education are more likely to try to influence the public and public opinion, although the effect is marginally significant. Bloggers with little education are more likely to use their blog as a platform for others, such as disadvantaged groups in society. Further, being more politically active (e.g., signing petitions, demonstrating) positively impacts the intensity of all blogging reasons.

Table 5 Predictors of blogging reasons

	Support & criticize pol.	Influence public opinion	Serve as platform	Research & scrutinize pol.	Inform others	Signal mistakes in the media	Organize & archive ideas and thoughts
Gender	.07	.20	.41	.33	.79*	.52	.31
Age	.00	.00	.03*	.00	.01	.01	-.02
Education (dummy)	-.59	0.65*	-1.44***	-.36	-.74	-.67	.00
Employed (dummy)	-.45	-.44 [†]	-.08	-.11	.04	-.11	.29
Political orientation	.02	.10**	.04	.10*	.02	.05	-.05
Political cynicism	.13 [†]	-.04	.03	.11	-.14 [†]	.08	.01
Political participation	.22***	.13**	.11*	.10*	.16**	.09 [†]	.15
<i>Adj. R²</i>	.262	.235	.265	.064	.131	.52	.86*
<i>F</i>	4.30***	3.86**	4.35***	1.64	2.39*	1.32	1.87 [†]

Note: Entries are unstandardized B coefficients

[†] p < .10. *p < .05. **p < .01 ***p < .001.

DISCUSSION

In recent years, various content analyses and surveys have tempered hopeful expectations with regard to political citizen journalism: the majority of citizens does not seem to participate (see also Chapter 2), active bloggers are mostly ‘usual suspects,’ content is often derived from mainstream media (see also Chapter 4) and other information is not always newsworthy. By directly surveying ordinary citizens who blog about politics, our study has aimed at expanding our understanding of the contents of the contemporary political blogosphere and the motives of its producers.

We, too, have to conclude that the initial expectations regarding the diversity and quality of contributions of political citizen journalism to the realm of politics and mainstream media have been somewhat unrealistic. Not many bloggers themselves consider their blog to be journalism. Our data seem to reflect the observation that most content is derived from mainstream media, that only a few blogs attract a substantial audience and that most bloggers do not think that their blog affects politics and media.

Rather, our results seem to suggest that many bloggers keep a weblog for other, mostly private and personal, reasons. For example, more or less 'intrinsic motivations,' such as organizing and archiving ideas by writing and working feelings out of their system, were deemed quite important by many. This observation is corroborated by the significant difference between the scores of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations questions. Furthermore, dissociation from the journalistic profession combined with the ambitious goal to exert influence in the political and media realm, could be a sign that political citizen bloggers should not be classified as citizen *journalists* but rather be labeled as political activists or critical citizens.

Of course, it should be stressed that despite the dominance of bloggers with the same sociodemographic profile as professional journalists (older, men, high education, left-leaning; see Herman, Vergeer, & Pleijter, 2011), a substantial share does not seem to be the 'usual suspects'. Most significantly, a quarter of our sample indicated not to have a job, but categorizes himself or herself as retired, student, disabled or unemployed: groups of people who traditionally did not have easy and open access to the public discourse. Of course, it could be that even these participants belong to the same relatively small group that writes letters-to-the-editor. However, not only is a small share of such reader-submitted contributions actually published, also letters that score higher with regard to writing quality and originality, and letters that follow the mainstream news agenda, are more likely to be published (Nielsen, 2010), and it has been found that older male letter writers are overrepresented (e.g., Cooper, Knotts, & Haspel, 2009; Nielsen, 2010). These observations, combined with the increased options for actual interactive debate (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011), could mean at least more people and probably also a somewhat more diverse array of citizens are now expressing themselves publicly.

These figures, together with bloggers' goal to critically express themselves with regard to politics and media, suggest that blogs may serve an important function for specific groups of people – who perhaps feel misrepresented or underrepresented in the public debate – as an outlet for personal and political expression. Also, their goals and role perceptions rather seem to suggest that political blogging is a form of political participation instead of (citizen) journalism.

Blogging thus can be considered as a possible alternative means of political engagement (Bennet, 2008; Gillmor, 2004) and a platform for

discourse on well-known mainstream media topics. Given the notion that political blogs offer the opportunity to ventilate political opinions, future studies should examine how blogging reasons evolve over time (see Ekdale et al., 2010) and whether political blogging may serve as a driver for changes in levels of political trust and efficacy, or whether blogging is rather a *result* of changes in these levels. It is, for example, interesting that political bloggers, although critical, are less politically cynical than the rest of the population. Also systematic comparisons between bloggers (or political users of other participatory media) and non-bloggers with respect to public opinion would yield relevant insights into how representative and diverse the population of political bloggers is. Overall, this would further our understanding of the actual relevance of political blogs to public discourse.

Once, it has been feared that the profession of journalism would be endangered or even wiped out by an army of voluntary citizens that would start their own news outlets. However, as of yet most citizens do not seem to be willing to invest the time and energy, or probably do not possess the skills, motivations and information resources, to overthrow the journalistic profession. Although journalism may have various enemies in the form of financial constraints, commercial pressure and increasing competition from new online outlets, political citizen journalism does not seem to be one of them.

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APPENDIX

First battery of reasons for blogging

Below you will find a list of possible motivations to blog. These are derived from other studies. Could you please indicate how important these are for you? Answer categories: Very unimportant; Unimportant; Neutral; Important; Very important.

- To signal mistakes in the media
- To signal unbalanced media coverage
- To cover subjects that get too little attention by mainstream media
- To support certain political parties or ideologies
- To support specific political policies
- To try and affect public opinion
- To criticize specific political policies
- To criticize certain political parties or ideologies
- To get in touch with other people
- To try and inspire discussions
- To inform others about the things I do
- To write feelings and thoughts out of my system
- To organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing

Second battery of reasons for blogging

Please indicate how important you find the goals listed below for you as a blogger. Answer categories: Unimportant; Not really important; Neutral; Important; Very important.

- Provide analysis and interpretation
- Get news to the public quickly
- Be an adversary of public officials and businesses
- Give people a chance to express their views
- Investigate claims of the government
- Signal new trends
- Develop intellectual/cultural interests of the public
- Stand up for the disadvantaged
- Provide entertainment
- Have an influence on politics and the public

Table A1 Factor loadings for principal axis factoring with varimax rotation of blogging reasons

	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support certain political parties or ideologies	0.83	0.09	0.04	0.10	0.09	-0.04	0.14
Support specific political policies	0.69	-0.04	0.03	0.00	0.14	0.20	0.07
Criticize certain political parties or ideologies	0.69	0.11	0.17	0.33	-0.12	0.15	0.06
Have an influence on the public/political agenda	0.65	0.59	0.06	0.11	0.11	0.08	-0.19
Criticize specific political policies	0.47	-0.08	0.16	0.41	-0.12	0.31	0.05
Trying to affect public opinion	0.38	0.70	-0.16	0.08	0.09	0.28	-0.13
Develop intellectual/cultural interests of the public	-0.14	0.67	0.09	0.00	0.06	0.07	0.26
Provide analysis and interpretation	-0.05	0.62	-0.28	0.13	0.02	-0.16	0.20
Initiate develop discussions	0.17	0.53	0.19	0.19	0.07	0.10	0.04
Give people a chance to express their views	0.10	-0.14	0.69	0.26	-0.04	0.18	-0.11
Stand up for the disadvantaged	0.30	0.15	0.63	0.06	0.02	0.28	0.01
Working feelings and thoughts out of my system	0.17	0.14	0.56	0.03	0.12	-0.05	0.25
Get news to the public quickly	-0.06	-0.11	0.56	0.03	0.36	0.10	-0.25
Provide entertainment	-0.07	0.00	0.48	-0.14	0.02	-0.10	0.11
Be an adversary of public officials and businesses	0.20	0.11	-0.09	0.76	0.07	0.02	-0.02
Investigate claims of the government	0.04	0.13	0.06	0.67	-0.02	0.08	0.05
Inform others about the things I do	0.16	0.00	0.00	-0.02	0.64	0.16	0.25
Signaling new trends	-0.09	0.29	0.21	-0.01	0.43	-0.08	-0.06
Get in touch with other people	0.21	0.29	0.20	0.03	0.42	0.02	0.14
Cover subjects that get too little attention by mainstream media	0.14	0.10	0.08	0.07	0.17	0.66	0.02
Signal mistakes in the media	0.18	0.12	0.12	0.51	-0.45	0.54	0.08
Signal unbalanced media coverage	0.38	0.08	0.05	0.38	-0.37	0.45	0.19
Organize and archive my ideas and thoughts by writing	0.19	0.25	0.10	0.09	0.21	0.09	0.77

Note. Factor loadings > .60 are in boldface. Rotation converged in 16 iterations.

NOTES

¹ For this study, a broad definition of ‘politics’ was employed, as to avoid including only blogs that dealt with conventional or institutional forms of politics. Political blog content was therefore defined as “any text where local, national, foreign or supranational politicians, political parties, political institutions and governmental policy are mentioned”.

² The blogs were selected by entering an extensive set of politically related keywords in the five largest blog search engines. This sample was then purged from abandoned, foreign and non-political blogs. A blog was considered political if either the blog advertised itself explicitly as focusing on politics (see the definition in the first endnote) or at least two out of the five most recent blog posts were political.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Those who come out on top of this struggle for eyeballs are not middle schoolers blogging about the trials of adolescence, nor are they a fictitious collection of pajama-clad amateurs taking on the old media from the comfort of their sofas. Overwhelmingly, they are well-educated white male professionals.

Matthew Hindman, 2009

When I hear the term “citizen journalist,” I reach for my pistol.

Jon Talton, 2008

At the moment, social media are just another tool, not unlike phone calls and letters to congressional offices, a way to take the pulse of a highly selective public.

Barry Hollander, 2011

Media innovations have historically been received with both hopes and fears regarding their influence on the intricate relationship between citizens, politics and media (Schoenbach, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that the increased availability of participatory media have led to the expectation that a fundamental reconfiguration and extension of the field of journalism would be inevitable. Political institutions and mainstream media have been experimenting heavily with the implementation of Twitter, Facebook, blogs and online discussion platforms. The increase of citizen participation has been thought to result in more diverse and less elitist news coverage and in participatory media that would allow citizens to publicly debate about politics and perhaps even exert control over the performance of politics and mainstream media. Critics on the other hand feared political polarization and fragmentation of the audience and claimed that citizens’ contributions would harm the quality of journalism and public discourse.

Despite the lively debate, systematic and empirical studies in this field, particularly outside the United States, are scant. And, existing scholarly work

has led to quite divergent views: while some studies seem to show that the increased availability of participatory media has been leading to a more diverse and representative composition of the political debate (the mobilization thesis), others have demonstrated that existing differences between those who participate and those who do not persist (normalization thesis) or even become more pronounced (reinforcement thesis).

This dissertation has consciously not taken sides with one of these camps. However, in order to contribute to the debate about the political and journalistic contribution of citizen journalism and participatory media, this dissertation has attempted to answer a number of straightforward but also fundamental questions. How many people are actually using participatory media such as Twitter, blogs or social networks? And what are their characteristics? And if they maintain a political blog, what do they write and how authentic is it? And also, why do ordinary citizens blog about politics, how personal or political are their reasons? The main goal of these explorations was to provide more solid ground for theorizing about the impact of participatory media on politics and public discourse.

A SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

In the first empirical chapter the results were presented of a large-scale survey among a sample representative of the Dutch population about its use of participatory media like social networks, Twitter and blogs. It was found that the non-political and more or less 'passive' uses of some participatory media, like social networks, are moderately popular. However, asked about the frequency of using these media in a *political* sense (e.g., reading political comments or tweets), or asked about actively contributing to participatory media (leaving commentary on forums or showing activity on social networks), activity rates drop substantially to only a few percent. The results of the survey suggest that traditional participation patterns (low number of active people, skewed with regard to sociodemographic characteristics) persist online.

In the next chapter, using the same data, the distinctive characteristics of the small group of active participants were examined more in-depth. The analysis confirmed the expectations that people who are more extravert and more open to experiences are more likely to make use of participatory media. Further, mediation analysis revealed that higher scores on the personality

traits extraversion and openness to experience lead to higher levels of interest, talk and news consumption, behaviors that in turn are significant predictors of using participatory media. Not only does the study show that dispositional characteristics such as extraversion and openness directly and indirectly influence participatory media use, it also provides support for the notion that a combination of established theoretical frameworks that have proved to have predictive power in the pre-Internet era, can help explain relatively new and unexplored online phenomena such as the political use of participatory media. More specifically, it appears that using dimensions from the Big Five personality model in tandem with established factors that are typically used to explain conventional forms of political participation help understanding the mechanisms that underlie participatory behavior.

Chapter four and five zoomed in on political blogs, one of the most typical forms of political citizen journalism. First, a content analysis examined the style, topics, originality and functions of the blogs. Besides only finding a relatively low number of active political blogs, many of the blogs contained personal opinions and expressed political criticism. For their content, they relied on mainstream media. Overall, three types of bloggers were identified: *columnists* (focus on national politics, more personal and opinionated, often express political criticism), *local activists* (prefer local over domestic issues, more often feature original content, try to mobilize the audience) and *filter bloggers* (content derived from mainstream media, mainly providing hyperlinks to external sources).

The last chapter surveyed the bloggers from the content analysis about their characteristics, practices and beliefs. It was found that most citizens who blog about politics are men from higher age categories with a political leaning to the left. For their content they often rely on mainstream news sources, and they do not have the feeling that their blog is very effective in terms in influencing politics or the media. Only a fifth identifies with the role description 'citizen journalist.' Concerning the reasons for blogging, bloggers attributed high importance to drawing attention to topics that mainstream media did not cover and tried to influence public opinion. It was notable that the personal reason 'organizing and archiving my thoughts by writing' was also important, and that respondents seemed to be more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically. In many ways, blogging about politics comes across as a way of personal political expression akin to acts of political participation, rather than acts of 'journalism.'

In sum, the findings of this dissertation challenge various utopian and dystopian views on the nature and scope of citizens' journalistic contributions. The studies have not found that a large and diverse army of citizen reporters has emerged that regularly and substantially contributes to the realm of news and politics, nor that many people feel or act like pro-typical 'citizen journalists'. The findings seem to fall in line with studies on the use and nature of interactive features of online news sites and on the collaboration of professionals and amateurs. They found that journalists are largely irreplaceable (Reich & Lahav, 2012), that user-generated content is more entertainment than hard news (Bergström, 2008), that collaboration between journalists and their audience is complex and often not cost-effective (Domingo et al., 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011) and that interactive features are often left unused (Quandt, 2008).

Although this dissertation may provide little support for people who expected more or less revolutionary changes, by no means do the findings suggest that scientific inquiry into the phenomenon of citizen participation is irrelevant, that it is all old wine in new bottles and that political communication is not undergoing changes. Instead, I argue that the results help more adequately identify relevant future research avenues. While there are of course various findings that are suitable for further exploration, I will specifically link the implications that are discussed in the next paragraphs with the expectations and questions that have been described in the introductory chapter. These have all focused on the overarching question as to which extent regular citizens, as a result of digitalization, are using participatory media for journalistic and political purposes. Given the fact that the studies have showed that the majority of citizens does not participate, that participation is often not political, that consumption is preferred over contribution, and that the content of blogs and the motivations of bloggers do not seem to suggest that professional journalism is seriously challenged, I propose four different research perspectives below that are relevant exploring based on the results from the dissertation.

REPRESENTATIVITY

Participatory media have been thought of as a means to widen the options for politics and news organizations to probe citizens' opinions and attitudes. Instead of relying on a handful of mainstream news sources, blogs and social

networks could offer voices from the full political gamut, younger generations and minority groups.

Given the small number of active political contributors identified in the dissertation, it would not be unlikely to find a discrepancy between the active and inactive group regarding their characteristics and political opinions and attitudes. If scholars argue that, normatively, it is desirable that society actively mobilizes underrepresented and inactive citizens to participate online, future studies could examine the possibilities to increase the participation rates of underrepresented groups of individuals. Interviews could yield insight into the barriers and considerations that play a role for hesitant spectators and case studies and experiments could be employed to identify the success factors and bottlenecks of participatory media. In this respect, the notion that privacy considerations seem to inhibit active participation (see chapter 2) while at the same time anonymous participation is considered to be at odds with the ideals of political discourse, is a relevant research avenue.

Relatedly, it would be relevant to examine to which extent participation rates and structures online correspond with the democratic system in the country at hand. This approach is particularly interesting given the recurrent claims of many authors that active participation of the audience in journalistic and political processes is natural and desirable now that the participatory tools are available online (e.g., Benkler, 2006). While the normative criteria of participatory and deliberative democratic models indeed include active participation and deliberation of citizens in journalism and at different stages of the political decision process, other models make far less normative demands on citizens (see Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002; Strömbäck, 2005). For example, supporters of the representative liberal theory share “the belief that ordinary citizens are poorly informed and have no serious interest in public affairs, and are generally ill-equipped for political participation. Hence, it is both natural and desirable for citizens to be passive, quiescent, and limited in their political participation in a well-functioning, party-led democracy” (Ferree et al., 2002, pp. 290–291). From this perspective, the dominance of and preference for certain theoretical democratic models in specific countries, could perhaps serve as suitable indicators of participation patterns online.

The notion that there is nothing wrong with a more or less passive electorate can of course also be connected to the ‘monitorial citizenship’ model that was introduced by Schudson (1999). He argues that although

many citizens may not be pro-active when politics are concerned, this not problematic for democracy. For the majority of people, being an ‘informed citizen’ is not only infeasible but also inefficient: Most citizens ‘monitor’ politics – generally by following the news – from a distance and are “poised for action if action is required” (p. 311). Thus, finding out under which conditions people move from being poised to actually swinging into action, is a challenging task for future studies.

ONLINE OPINION LEADERS

It is still common parlance to expect previously inactive or ‘disconnected’ citizens to become politically active now that participatory media are available. And sure, the absolute number of Twitter, Facebook and WordPress accounts has increased exponentially in recent years. But closer inspection of the survey data revealed that the large majority of respondents who indicate to use such media prefer ‘consuming’ – lurkers – over actively contributing content, and mostly in a non-political way. Combined with the insights from the survey among bloggers and the content analysis, the results seem to suggest that citizens with more resources are more likely to participate. This group, we now know, is relatively small.

But despite the low number of active online political participants, recent years have seen an everlasting attention by media, politicians and scholars for participatory media like Twitter, Facebook and Hyves. Why? It can be assumed that the small group of participants has a significant effect on how political information and opinion spreads, even to those who do not use these participatory media. Indeed, a recent PEW report (Purcell, Rainie, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010) showed that the majority of social network users are being updated about current affairs and news through the updates and hyperlinks that are posted by the people in their network: “75% get news forwarded through e-mail or posts on social networking sites and 52 percent share links to news with others via those means” (p. 4).

Such dynamics, of course, bring to mind a classic communication theory, gatekeeping (White, 1950). While the influential role of elite sources and the journalistic practices and newsroom culture in the sourcing and production of news (Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Sigal, 1973) may largely remain, it has been found that nonelites are crucial for further dissemination over the Web (Dylko, Beam, Landreville, & Geidner, 2012; see Bruns, 2005,

for an elaboration on the concept of 'gatewatching').

In the same vein, there is much attention for the role of 'hubs' in information networks, such as (online and offline) opinion leaders (Farrell & Drezner, 2008; Eveland, Hutchens, & Morey, 2011; Himelboim, 2011; Mutz & Young, 2011). Besides online opinion leaders functioning as contemporary gatekeepers, they also seem to perform an agenda-setting function (Trenaman & McQuail, 1961): They seem to be capable to influence the public, but also mainstream media, as to what think or write about. And, their relatively strong power to influence people's knowledge, opinions or attitudes and political engagement can of course be traced back to the classic two-step model of information flows (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Although the two- (or multi-)step model has been thought not always to apply in the context of public opinion about politics, technology has altered this view:

We see great potential for this theory to experience a renaissance (...). When news consumers confront the excessive choices of today's media environment, one extremely important way they decide what to pay attention to is through recommendations that reach them through their online social networks. Given the well-documented tendency toward homogeneity in social networks, social media recommendations have considerable potential to polarize people's information environments (Mutz & Young, 2011, p. 1038).

The new modes, possibilities and speed of sharing and publishing information merits specific attention for how and by whom 'the audience' is confronted with information. How many steps are involved, what do the networks of online opinion leaders look like and which characteristics (e.g., retweets, number of followers, search engine ranking) affect how, if at all, information is spreading to the audience. It is also not surprising to see an upsurge in online credibility research that examines the circumstances, cues and contexts that determine whether online information is believed or not and is, as a result, more likely to have a wider circulation (e.g., Chung, Nam, & Stefanone, 2012).

CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

The advent of participatory online tools for citizens has led to a reinvigoration of studies that examine how these tools are affecting the public sphere. However, in the Netherlands, the results from this dissertation, combined with the journalists and online developments of recent years, seems to suggest that the success of ‘citizen journalism’ in the realm of politics is limited. Could an explanation be that this is the Netherlands?

Of course, there are various practical reasons: people may not be stimulated or facilitated enough, they do not have the skills to actual participate or they simply do not have the desire to get politically or journalistically engaged at all. However, there may be important other sociopolitical or contextual factors that could account for changes in levels of success of participatory media (e.g., Watson & Riffe, 2011). Similarly, much importance has been attributed to blogs, social networks and Twitter in igniting and organizing the ‘Arab spring’ (Howard & Parks, 2012) and in facilitating political mobilization and spreading uncensored information in less democratic and politically unstable countries, such as China, Cuba and Iran (Loewenstein, 2008). Thus, the limited level of success of participatory media could very well be a sign of a situation in which, generally speaking, the level of satisfaction with the regime and the media system is higher than in other countries. While participatory media are a suitable platform to voice criticism about the performance of politics or media, this has not become common practice among all Dutch citizens. Discussed from a rational choice theory perspective, it could thus be argued that the benefits of participation in countries with well-functioning mass media and stable politics are marginal and do not outweigh, at least for most people, the time and energy (costs) that are involved.

EFFECTS ON TRUST AND ATTITUDES

As a final point, I contend that it is relevant to consider whether there may be less ‘manifest’ effects of participatory media. It has been established that only a few contribute to the online public discourse. In many ways, this is not much different from the pre-Internet era, in which only a small portion of the population actively participated in political matters. However, the introduction of participatory media has substantially lowered the barriers for participation:

sending an e-mail, following a politician on Twitter or contacting a journalist are only a click away. Thus, these possibilities provide citizens with the *opportunity* to express their political opinions online, share newsworthy information, contribute content to mainstream media or contact politicians. This experience – of being provided the opportunity to participate – may impact citizens’ sense of political ‘confidence’. Seeing how fellow citizens are actively participating in political discussion on the Internet could develop citizens self-confidence as to their personal ability to also be able to participate effectively in politics (i.e., their internal efficacy). Or, witnessing online discussions between citizens and political actors may increase individuals’ trust in the responsiveness of politicians and authorities (i.e., external efficacy).

Alternatively, it could be that confrontations with abusive content and polarized discussions on online platforms have detrimental effects. Besides decreasing the likelihood that some people will decide to opt out of future participation, negative experiences may also affect their opinion about the public and political climate in their country or region. One can only speculate about the consequences when citizens are confronted with a blogosphere as envisioned by critics, vividly described by Miel and Faris (2008): “The manipulation of the blogosphere—and hence public opinion— is the newest dark art. A deluge of meaningless, self-centered chatter drowns out rare glimmers of online insight or truth” (p. 4). Relevant in this respect are for example the links that have been found between individuals’ perception of political polarization and attitude extremity (Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012), a phenomenon that of course also applies to Web.

THE FUTURE

It is undeniable that participatory media have left their marks on society. They have led many to expect that previously inactive citizens would start to engage in acts of ‘political citizen journalism’. The central aim of this dissertation was to shed light on the strong assumptions about the political uses of participatory media by citizens. Overall, I arrive at the conclusion that despite the various expectations, it seems that many things have remained unchanged regarding the relationship between politics, journalists and citizens: A few vocal, critical and politically interested citizens engage themselves in public political discourse, while the majority prefers

consumption over participation or refrains from it altogether. And even this active group of people does not seem to aspire to be direct competitors for professional journalists.

Does this conclusion mean that all the developments of the last decade have no consequences for media, politics and science? Certainly not. However, I contend that my findings lend little support for viewing the political potential of participatory media as a democratic panacea or a digital disaster. Before the Internet there were people who wished to participate, and today they are still there, only now equipped with far more advanced and attractive communication tools. It therefore also makes sense that media and politics employ participatory tools to consult and interact with this group. There are lively political discussions on the Web, media eagerly publish user-generated content to complement their own news coverage and the establishment of Twitter and Facebook is revolutionary. However, the small proportion of people who participate compared to those who do not, makes online participatory media not necessarily the best tools for gauging public opinion.

What do my findings mean for political communication science? In the last decade, there have been many scholars that have argued that extant theories, categorizations and conceptualizations would undergo radical changes as a result of the advent of participatory media and citizen journalism. The roles of journalists as gatekeepers, media as agenda-setters and a small elite as opinion leaders would gradually play out. And on even a broader societal level, it has repeatedly been argued that participatory media would affect the arrangement of the 'public sphere', as online citizens would collectively assume power from the mass media, which were accused of being too commercial, elitist and irresponsible as it came to offering a well-functioning platform for political information and public discourse. These aforementioned contentions, however, were largely based on studies that used anecdotal evidence or lacked methodological rigor otherwise. The findings from my studies however suggest that the role of citizens has remained largely unchanged, which would mean that most extant theories and mechanisms still apply. Nevertheless, the debate about the fundamental societal changes that participatory media will bring about will certainly continue when looking back on previous introductions of 'new media'. As Schoenbach (2001) has noted: "The myths of media and audiences in their sensuality and simplicity are often more convincing than the scientifically established but complicated answers" (p. 372).

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English summary

The great potential and the ubiquitousness of the Internet have led scholars, journalists and political actors alike to critically reexamine the triadic relationship between politics, media and citizens. The wide-ranging possibilities for ordinary citizens to easily and publicly express themselves by using participatory media like blogs, Twitter and social networks have led to the notion that those media should also have considerable effects on journalism and politics.

The nature and direction of the alleged effects vary widely. On the one hand, increased citizen participation has been hailed as a valuable addition to professional journalism and public discourse. Optimists claim that new media techniques allow for more participation by neglected groups of people. Topics and opinions can be brought to light that have received little to no attention. Mainstream media can be reprimanded by the audience for unbalanced news coverage while interactive collaboration between professional journalists and citizens could lead to better products. Critics, on the other hand, have asserted that increased citizen participation will primarily be detrimental. They fear that professional journalistic standards and practices (accuracy, independence, objectivity) will fade when lay people are allowed to engage in forms of 'citizen journalism', that public debate will be filled with speculations and unfounded opinions from mostly anonymous sources or that public discourse becomes fragmented now that people are, more than before, able to seek out information sources that match and reinforce their political attitudes.

Despite their different expectations, the optimistic and pessimistic camps are united in the notion that, in any case, the establishment of participatory media and their lowered threshold for citizen participation impact traditional notions of professional journalism and political participation. This dissertation, however, starts with the observation that most of the claims regarding the consequences of participatory media largely rely on case studies and anecdotal evidence.

More systematic studies that have sought to examine the degree and nature of the use of participatory media are scant. Further, despite the political significance ascribed to participatory media, politics is often not the focus of research in this domain. The same goes for the prominence of citizens: Many studies focus on the use of participatory media by professional

news organizations, by political actors or by other elite figures (A-list bloggers) rather than 'regular people'. Also, most often the topic has been studied in the United States. However, there may be differences in political, cultural and media systems that could make generalizations problematic.

In order to fill some of the gaps described above, this dissertation has tried to shed more light on citizens' participation in journalism and politics in the Netherlands, answering basic questions such as: how many people are actually participating, what characteristics do these people have, on what platforms are they participating, what kind of content do they produce, and what are their goals? These questions and the relevant historical and theoretical perspectives are outlined in chapter 1.

In chapter 2 the results of a large survey (N=2,081), representative of the Dutch population, are presented about the use of various participatory media: blogs, Twitter, social networks, discussion forums, commentary options and uploading photos and videos. Besides examining the frequency of participatory media use, the survey distinguished between passive and active use (i.e., *reading* messages on Twitter or actually *writing* tweets) and between political and non-political use (blogging about politics or blogging about entertainment). It was found that around 6% of the population actually contributed political content to participatory media on at least a monthly basis. It was found that these citizens are more interested in politics, talk more about politics, are Internet-savvy, have a stronger political self-confidence and are much more likely to have a better education. The results thus seem to suggest that traditional participation patterns – a relatively small number of active people, skewed with regard to background characteristics – reappear online.

Chapter 3 examines the distinctive characteristics of the small group of active participants more in-depth. The study follows the nascent literature that has recognized the significance of personality traits in predicting human behavior and therefore zooms in on the explanatory power of two of the 'Big Five' factors: extraversion and openness to experience. As hypothesized, citizens who are more extravert and more open to experiences are more likely to make political use of participatory media. Also, these traits further political interest, political talk and online news consumption, which in turn increase the use of participatory media.

Chapter 4 is devoted to examine the content that citizens produce. To this end, a content analysis was conducted of Dutch political blogs produced by

ordinary citizens. The data collection resulted in 162 blogs that regularly published political content. The results reveal that many blogs are rather personal (written in first-person), opinionated and not very interactive (i.e., comments are rare on most blogs). Most bloggers do not engage in journalistic research activities (conducting interviews, quoting others, describing events as eyewitnesses), but heavily rely on mainstream news media for their information. The bloggers that actually *do* produce their own content, mainly focused on local politics. The majority of bloggers – about whom information was available – was male and between 40 and 60 years old.

Chapter 5 surveyed the bloggers from the content analysis about *why* they blog. Most bloggers do not view their activity as a form of (citizen) journalism. Despite the fact that many people blog in order to influence public opinion or to cover subjects that get too little attention by mainstream media, the majority is not under the impression that their blog influences mainstream media or politics. It is therefore not surprising to find that personal and intrinsic motivations to blog, such as blogging to organize and archive one's ideas and thoughts by writing them down in a blog, were deemed very important. Still, there is an – albeit very small – share of bloggers regularly publishing information based on first-hand information.

In chapter 6, the main implications of the studies and directions for future research are discussed. In sum, the results show that most people do not participate, that most participation is not political, that consumption is preferred over contribution, and that the content of blogs and the motivations of bloggers do not seem to challenge professional journalism seriously.

Despite these assertions, by no means do my findings suggest that scientific inquiry into the phenomenon of citizen participation is irrelevant. Instead, I argue that the results help more adequately identify future research avenues. It would, for example, be important to examine how participatory media in today's society impact lurkers' political attitudes. Although most people refrain from participation, witnessing how fellow citizens are actively contributing to political discussions could develop citizens' self-confidence – to also be able to participate effectively in politics. Or, witnessing online discussions between citizens and political actors may increase individuals' trust in the responsiveness of politicians and authorities.

Alternatively, confrontations with abusive content and polarized discussions on online platforms could have detrimental effects. Besides

making people opt out of future participation, negative experiences may also affect their opinion about the political climate in their country or region. Another perspective that should be examined in internationally comparative research is whether satisfaction, for instance, with the political regime plays a role. Perhaps the benefits of popular participation in countries with well-functioning mass media and stable politics are marginal and do not outweigh, at least for most people, the time and energy involved.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Het internet biedt gewone burgers talloze mogelijkheden om zich op relatief eenvoudige wijze en in het openbaar uit te spreken door gebruik te maken van participatieve media zoals weblogs, Twitter en andere sociale media. Dit heeft ertoe geleid dat de verwachtingen over de impact van deze nieuwe media op journalistiek en politiek hooggespannen zijn. Over de aard en de richting van de veronderstelde impact lopen de veronderstellingen echter uiteen.

Aan de ene kant wordt meer participatie vanuit het publiek gezien als een waardevolle toevoeging aan de professionele journalistiek en het publieke debat. In dat verband wordt gesteld dat nieuwe media het voor achtergestelde groepen mogelijk maken om politiek en journalistiek te participeren. Onderbelichte onderwerpen en meningen kunnen nu wel aan bod komen terwijl de traditionele media door het publiek gecorrigeerd kunnen worden als er sprake is van eenzijdige berichtgeving. Meer interactieve samenwerking tussen professionele journalisten en burgers zou bovendien kunnen leiden tot betere nieuwsproducten. Critici daarentegen betogen dat burgerparticipatie vooral nadelige gevolgen heeft. Zij vrezen dat journalistieke normen en waarden (nauwkeurigheid, objectiviteit, onafhankelijkheid) zullen vervagen als burgerjournalisten taken van professionele journalisten overnemen. Ook wordt gesteld dat het publieke debat overspoeld zal worden door speculaties en ongefundeerde meningen van voornamelijk anonieme bronnen of dat het debat zal fragmenteren doordat mensen – meer dan vroeger – vooral informatie zullen zoeken die hun politieke overtuigingen versterkt.

Ondanks hun verschillende verwachtingen zijn zowel het optimistische als het pessimistische kamp ervan overtuigd dat het gebruik van participatieve media hoe dan ook gevolgen zal hebben voor traditionele journalistiek en politieke participatie. Dit proefschrift begint echter met de observatie dat de meeste aannames met betrekking tot de consequenties van participatieve media empirisch zwak onderbouwd zijn en vooral berusten op casestudies en anekdotisch bewijs.

Meer systematisch opgezette studies waarin de mate en de aard van het gebruik van participatieve media onderzocht is, zijn betrekkelijk schaars. Bovendien is politiek vaak niet de focus in bestaand onderzoek, ondanks het politieke belang dat aan participatieve media wordt toegeschreven. Ook is er

niet altijd evenveel aandacht voor 'burgers'. Veel onderzoeken gaan over het gebruik van participatieve media door professionele nieuwsorganisaties, door politieke actoren of door vooraanstaande bloggers. Bovendien is het onderwerp voornamelijk bestudeerd in de Verenigde Staten. De verschillen op politiek - en cultureel terrein zijn echter zo groot dat generalisaties problematisch zijn. Daarnaast verschilt het Amerikaanse mediasysteem wezenlijk van het onze.

Om een aantal van de leemtes die hierboven beschreven zijn, te vullen, is er in dit proefschrift geprobeerd om meer duidelijkheid te verschaffen over het gebruik van participatieve media door gewone burgers op het terrein van journalistiek en politiek. Hierbij worden fundamentele vragen beantwoord zoals hoeveel mensen er daadwerkelijk deelnemen, wat hun kenmerken zijn, via welke platformen zij deelnemen, wat voor *content* zij produceren en wat hun doelen zijn. Deze vragen en de relevante en theoretische benaderingen komen aan de orde in hoofdstuk 1.

In hoofdstuk 2 worden de uitkomsten beschreven van een survey die is uitgevoerd onder meer dan 2000 burgers, een groep die representatief is voor de Nederlandse bevolking. Het onderzoek gaat over het gebruik van verschillende participatieve media: blogs, Twitter, sociale netwerken, discussiefora, reacties-opties bij nieuwsberichten, en het uploaden van foto's en video's. In dit onderzoek naar de frequentie van het gebruik van participatieve media wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen passief en actief gebruik (bijvoorbeeld het *lezen* van berichten op Twitter en het daadwerkelijk *schrijven* ervan) en tussen politiek - en niet-politiek gebruik (bloggen over politiek of bloggen over entertainment). Het bleek dat 6% van de bevolking tenminste maandelijks daadwerkelijk politieke content toevoegt op participatieve media. Deze burgers bleken meer geïnteresseerd te zijn in politiek, meer over politiek te praten, meer kennis van internet te hebben, zelfverzekerder te zijn als het om politiek gaat en vaker hoogopgeleid te zijn. De resultaten laten dus zien dat traditionele participatiepatronen – een klein aantal actieve personen, scheef verdeeld qua achtergrondkenmerken – ook online te vinden zijn.

In hoofdstuk 3 wordt dieper ingegaan op de typische kenmerken van de kleine groep actieve deelnemers. De studie is theoretisch gebaseerd op literatuur waarin gesteld wordt dat het belang van persoonlijkheidskenmerken bij het voorspellen van menselijk gedrag voorop staat. Met name twee van de 'Big Five'-factoren – extravertie en het openstaan voor nieuwe ervaringen –

lijken hier verklarend. Zoals verondersteld, maken burgers die extravertter zijn en meer openstaan voor nieuwe ervaringen, vaker in politiek opzicht gebruik van participatieve media. Bovendien zorgen hun persoonlijkheidskenmerken ervoor meer politieke interesse, meer politieke conversatie en meer online nieuwsconsumptie, hetgeen weer zorgt voor een toename in het gebruik van participatieve media.

In hoofdstuk 4 staat de content die burgers produceren centraal. Er is een inhoudsanalyse uitgevoerd van Nederlandse politieke blogs die geschreven worden door gewone burgers. Het onderzoek leverde 162 blogs op waarop regelmatig politieke content te vinden was. De resultaten laten zien dat veel blogs persoonlijk getint zijn (geschreven in de ik-vorm), vaak een mening bevatten en weinig interactief zijn (reacties komen zelden voor). De meeste bloggers houden zich niet bezig met journalistiek onderzoek (interviewen, citeren, het beschrijven van gebeurtenissen in reportagevorm) maar maken veel gebruik van reguliere nieuwsmedia. De bloggers die wel hun eigen content produceren, concentreren zich veelal op lokale politiek. Van de bloggers waarvan persoonlijkheidskenmerken bekend waren, bleek de meerderheid mannelijk en tussen de 40 en 60 jaar.

In hoofdstuk 5 werd onderzocht *waarom* de bloggers die onderdeel waren van de inhoudsanalyse (hoofdstuk 4) bloggen. De meesten van hen zagen hun activiteiten niet als een vorm van (burger-)journalistiek. Ondanks dat veel bloggers graag de publieke opinie willen beïnvloeden of onderwerpen aan de orde willen stellen die te weinig aandacht in reguliere media krijgen, heeft de meerderheid niet het idee dat hun blog invloed heeft op die reguliere media of de politiek. Het is daarom ook niet verrassend dat persoonlijke en intrinsieke motivaties, zoals bloggen om eigen ideeën en gedachten te structureren en vast te leggen door ze in een blog op te nemen, zeer belangrijk gevonden werden. Daarbij moet worden opgemerkt dat een klein deel van de bloggers wel regelmatig informatie uit de eerste hand publiceert.

In hoofdstuk 6 worden de belangrijkste implicaties van de empirische studies besproken en suggesties voor nader onderzoek gedaan. Samengevat laten de resultaten zien dat de meeste mensen niet participeren, dat participatie meestal niet politiek van aard is, dat consumeren de voorkeur heeft boven bijdragen en dat de content van blogs en de motivaties van bloggers geen serieuze bedreiging lijken te vormen voor professionele journalistiek.

Ondanks deze vaststellingen suggereren de bevindingen niet dat onderzoek naar burgerparticipatie irrelevant is. In plaats daarvan stel ik dat de resultaten bijdragen aan het beter vormgeven van toekomstig onderzoek. Omdat we nu weten dat betrekkelijk weinig mensen actief meedoen, zou het relevant zijn om uit te zoeken hoe participatieve media de politieke opvattingen van deze niet-actieve gebruikers beïnvloedt. Hoewel de meeste mensen zich onthouden van participatie kan het observeren van de activiteiten van anderen wel het politiek zelfvertrouwen van burgers vergroten. Ook is het mogelijk dat het waarnemen van online-discussies leidt tot meer vertrouwen van burgers in de responsiviteit van politici en autoriteiten.

Tegelijkertijd kunnen confrontaties met grove, beledigende content en scherp gepolariseerde discussies op online-platformen negatieve effecten hebben. Afgezien van het feit dat mensen zich af kunnen keren van participatie, kunnen dergelijke ervaringen ook hun weerslag hebben op hun mening over het politieke klimaat in hun land of regio. Een ander perspectief dat in internationaal vergelijkend onderzoek onderzocht zou moeten worden is of tevredenheid met bijvoorbeeld het politieke regime een rol speelt. Wellicht zijn de voordelen van burgerparticipatie in landen met goed-functionerende massamedia en een stabiel politiek systeem marginaal, en wegen de voordelen van participatie niet op tegen de tijd en energie die het kost.