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

Bakker, T.P.

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## Chapter 2

The people still known as the audience:  
The limited political use of online  
participatory media<sup>\*</sup>

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<sup>\*</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

## **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](http://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 population<sup>2</sup>. 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**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Consuming general</b>		<b>Consuming political</b>	
	<b>≥ Once per month</b>	<b>≥ Once per week</b>	<b>≥ Once per month</b>	<b>≥ Once per week</b>
Comments	36 <sup>a</sup>	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.

<sup>a</sup> 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**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Contributing general</b>		<b>Contributing political</b>	
	<b>≥ Once per month</b>	<b>≥ Once per week</b>	<b>≥ Once per month</b>	<b>≥ Once per week</b>
Comments	11 <sup>a</sup>	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.

<sup>a</sup> 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) <sub>a</sub>	46.21 (16.81) <sub>a</sub>	38.01 (14.80) <sub>b</sub>
Gender (0=female)	0-1	0.48 (0.50) <sub>a</sub>	0.48 (0.50) <sub>a</sub>	0.59 (0.49) <sub>b</sub>
Education	0-1	0.31 (0.46) <sub>a</sub>	0.47 (0.50) <sub>b</sub>	0.48 (0.50) <sub>b</sub>
<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) <sub>a</sub>	4.65 (2.27) <sub>b</sub>	4.44 (2.34) <sub>b</sub>
Online news	0-7	2.05 (2.57) <sub>a</sub>	4.53 (2.58) <sub>b</sub>	4.82 (2.38) <sub>b</sub>
Media cynicism	0-7	4.52 (1.23)	4.68 (1.16)	4.59 (1.23)
Internet skills	1-7	5.05 (1.56) <sub>a</sub>	5.72 (1.19) <sub>b</sub>	6.04 (1.03) <sub>c</sub>
<i>Political variables</i>				
Internal efficacy	1-7	2.89 (1.32) <sub>a</sub>	3.53 (1.33) <sub>b</sub>	4.04 (1.27) <sub>c</sub>
External efficacy	1-7	3.11 (1.49)	3.20 (1.43)	3.25 (1.41)
Political interest	1-7	3.36 (1.73) <sub>a</sub>	4.40 (1.58) <sub>b</sub>	4.78 (1.52) <sub>c</sub>
Political talk	0-7	1.01 (1.41) <sub>a</sub>	2.05 (1.78) <sub>b</sub>	2.38 (1.87) <sub>c</sub>
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 <sup>a</sup>	1-4	3.24 (1.03) <sub>a</sub>	3.55 (0.73) <sub>b</sub>	3.53 (0.83) <sub>b</sub>

*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.

<sup>a</sup>The 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 analyses<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

**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 <sup>2</sup> (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 about<sup>5</sup>. 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>	<b>Inactives</b>		<b>Consumers</b>	
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
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

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<sup>1</sup> 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."

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.