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Getting connected: The effects of online political communication on citizens' political involvement

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE DISSERTATION

“The most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it.” (Robert Putnam, 2000, p. 180)

With the advent of the Internet, new online technologies and platforms changed the way citizens can communicate about politics. Especially the increase in opportunities to communicate with political actors and others without the interference of gatekeepers is at the very center of this shift (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Parmelee & Bichard, 2011). The prospects to get connected with politics seem endless. New online technologies enable vertical and horizontal communication between citizens, and between citizens and political actors. Citizens can, for example, share information on forums, get voting advice, ask questions and give feedback to political candidates and parties on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Political actors and political organizations have the opportunity to communicate with citizens as well. They can, for instance, provide citizens with information about their plans and views on personal blogs, motivate the electorate to become politically active via party websites, talk about their personal activities or private life on Twitter and persuade citizens to vote for them. Online communication technologies thus not only offer opportunities for citizens, but also for political actors and parties to communicate in a more interactive and personal way.

But the Internet not only rapidly transformed the way citizens can communicate about politics. The barriers to engage in political activities are greatly reduced (Norris, 2000) and new technologies added ways for citizens to participate in politics (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Technological advantages lowered the cost to participate, which makes it easier for citizens to, for instance, donate money online, sign online petitions, and learn more about politics by reading online information or news.

As the advent of the Internet offers citizens different ways to communicate about and to participate in politics, it is almost inevitable that this has political consequences for society. Since the mid-1990s, it has often been voiced that the Internet has a decisive influence on democracy (Anstead & Chadwick, 2008). In his acclaimed book, Hindman (2009) highlights this notion: “[F]rom the moment that [the Internet] became a mass medium, [i]ts most important promise [...] was political. New sources of online information would make citizens more informed about politics. New forms of Internet organizing would help recruit previously inactive citizens into political participation. Cyberspace would become a robust forum for political debate.” (p. 1). This assumption is at the heart of this dissertation. It is investigated whether the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens’ involvement in politics.

Focus of the dissertation

There seem to be three reasons why great optimism about the Internet prevails. The first reason is the increase in number of citizens who use the Internet in their everyday lives (Anstead & Chadwick, 2008). In particular, the growing majority of citizens that have access to an Internet connection contributed to this development (e.g., in the Netherlands, Internet penetration rate is 94 percent of the households, CBS, 2011). It has been expected that citizens will use the Internet to communicate their viewpoints, opinions and desires effectively to political actors and that they will learn more about various political affairs and policies (Margolis & Moreno-Riaño, 2013). The second major reason is the adoption of Internet by political candidates and organizations. Political actors see the benefits of online communication through digital platforms (Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). Today, incorporating online communication strategies in political campaigning is standard practice for most parties and candidates. The last reason, or more precisely, major event, was the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Although it was not the first time that the Internet was used in a campaign, “[Obama’s] strategy was planned and executed in a way that allowed him to gain advantage over the other candidates [...] in the presidential elections” (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011, p. 191). By using various online tools to mobilize voters, the Obama campaign motivated more than three million contributors and activated five million volunteers. It appeared that the Obama campaign did not only raise money, but also, and maybe more interestingly, enhanced political participation and voter turnout (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

Despite the enthusiasm about the use, adoption and effects of online communication, scholars disagree about the impact of the Internet (Boulianne, 2009; Hindman, 2009; Norris, 2000; Tedesco, 2008). Pessimistic scholars predict that the Internet undermines democracy, as it will lead to a decline in civic engagement (Boulianne,

2009). Optimistic scholars believe that the Internet will mobilize citizens to become politically active and thereby the Internet contributes to democracy (Tedesco, 2008). Skeptical scholars claim that the Internet will only engage those citizens who are already engaged. Thus, the Internet only reinforces existing patterns of political participation: it widens the gap between citizens who are more and those who are less politically sophisticated (Norris, 2000). Several studies have examined the impact of the Internet on political (and civic) engagement (Boulianne, 2009). However, scholars repeatedly found inconsistent results (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Research used inconsistent measures and models were differently specified (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009). Questions about the political consequences of Internet use remain unanswered.

So, taken together, there is a lot of excitement about the impact of online political communication. There is, however, remarkable little agreement on whether the Internet will contribute to democracy by strengthening political involvement or whether it will contribute to a decline in political involvement (Boulianne, 2009). This dissertation tries to shed light on this void by dealing with the, as of yet, unsettled debate in online political communication research. The main objective is to examine the impact of online political communication on citizens' political involvement. The dissertation aims to investigate whether form and content characteristics of online political communication contribute to democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics. The overall research question of this dissertation is: *What are the effects of online political communication on citizens' involvement in politics?*

In order to understand to what extent Internet use affects involvement, theories from political communication, computer-mediated communication and marketing research are combined. Additionally, a multi-method design will be applied and data for the studies will be gathered during and outside election campaigns. Furthermore, this dissertation measures different aspects of the main outcome variable: political involvement. Thus, this thesis offers an in-depth investigation of the consequences of online political communication.

In the remaining part of this chapter, the dissertation will be introduced in much greater detail. First, the link between this thesis and several democratic theories will be given. Then, theories of Internet use and citizens' political involvement will be described. Following this description, the shift of focus towards the main characteristics of online political communication will be explained. Finally, the use of different methods is explained, and lastly, the dissertation outline will be given.

FOSTERING DEMOCRACY: WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Before this dissertation introduces the main theories that shape our thinking of the relationship between Internet use and citizens' political involvement, one fundamental question should be answered. Why is it important that citizens participate in politics? Why should we even care that citizens are active online? These questions are especially relevant with regard to the bigger debate about the consequences of political Internet use. As mentioned previously, optimistic scholars often believe that the Internet

stimulates democracy (Tedesco, 2008), and in contrast, pessimistic and skeptical scholars believe that the Internet undermines democracy (Norris, 2000). The question that is unanswered is what constitutes a 'good' democracy. Views about democracy are largely normative (Hindman, 2009): "different normative views [exists] regarding what characterizes a good democracy" (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 333). These normative views are translated into different models of democracy. Such "models carry different normative expectations on citizens and politicians" (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 333). Answering the question whether the Internet contributes to, or undermines democracy, is therefore no easy task. It requires some knowledge about the different models of democracy, which is explained in the following section. Additionally, a choice for a certain perspective on democracy (a model) should be made to examine whether the Internet's effects meet the expectations of a certain perspective.

The classical models of democracy (Pateman, 1970) ask only minimum requirements from citizens and political actors (Strömbäck, 2008). Free, fair and competitive elections, wherein citizens vote and have knowledge about societal issues and politics, are core necessities. Compared to these classical models of democracy, *participatory democracy* and *deliberative democracy* models demand much more from citizens and political actors (Bohman, 2007). The participatory model of democracy requests citizens to participate in civic and political activities and, thereby, creating bonds and associations with political actors. It has often been voiced that when citizens participate and feel connected, they get more interested in politics, engage in political organizations, and in the end, citizen will vote more often (Strömbäck, 2008). The deliberative model of democracy asks even more from political actors and citizens. This model demands that decisions should always be preceded by discussions. Such discussion should be rational, impartial and requires equal participation and every value about a conflict should be discussed (Strömbäck, 2008). These latter two forms of democracy are often regarded as 'strong' forms of democracy (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003).

This dissertation evaluates whether its empirical findings meet the expectations of the model of participatory democracy. The participatory model of democracy describes that citizens should engage in civic and political activities and create connections with political actors. Citizens will then develop a collective concern about societal issues (Held, 2006). More political participation and engagement in politics is desirable, because involvement provides a mechanism through which citizens can voice their desires and interests to their representatives (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Political actors can then understand citizens' concerns. Moreover, democracy needs citizens to participate in political processes; otherwise no responsiveness to citizens' interests would exist (Verba et al., 1995). Given the fact that more participation and involvement in politics is good for democracy, according to the participatory model of democracy, we should care about whether citizens are active and involved, both online and offline.

In sum, this thesis is mainly focused on the effects of online political communication on political involvement. It investigates whether involvement increases among citizens due to the Internet. This is a desirable outcome in a participatory democracy. Therefore, this thesis is predominantly linked to the participatory model of democracy.

Political involvement

The main dependent variable in this dissertation is political involvement. Political involvement contains a variety of measures of engagement in politics (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Verba et al., 1995; Verba, Burns, & Schlozman, 1997). More specifically, this dissertation is aimed at different facets of political involvement: It focuses on psychological (feelings of) political involvement (e.g., interest in politics; see Chapter 2 and 4), political behavioral intention (e.g., political talk; see Chapter 5) and actual political behavior (e.g., voting and engaging in online political activities; see Chapter 2 and 3). In this dissertation, political behavior is equivalent to political participation. While political involvement is highly related to participation, and some scholars even consider engagement a cause of participation (Verba et al., 1995), participation and engagement fall in this dissertation under the same umbrella: political involvement.

THEORIES ON ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS: THE HOPES AND FEARS

Although the link between the Internet, political involvement and democracy has been an appealing research venue for political scientists, communication and media scholars (Polat, 2005), scientists compete in predicting the consequences of Internet use on political involvement (Boulianne, 2009; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Overall, there are three groups of scholars, who have opposing viewpoints: the pessimistic, the optimistic and the moderate optimistic or skeptical scholars. In the next section of this chapter, these three views will be described.

The pessimistic view: a decline in political involvement

“One set of scholars [...] believe that the Internet will have a detrimental effect on engagement, because this technology is being used primarily for entertainment” (Boulianne, 2009, p. 193). This statement is based on research that was conducted around the turn of the twenty-first century. Studies found that Internet use was associated with decline in social involvement (spending less time with families and others within their social circle) and an increase in depressions and loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998; Norman & Lutz, 2000). The causal mechanism behind this phenomenon can be found in the ‘time displacement theory’. This theory was introduced by Robert Putnam (2000) for television news, but is often extended to the Internet (Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002). The theory of time displacement explains that when citizens spent more time online, they have less time to involve in civic or social activities (see, also Boulianne, 2009; Kraut et al., 1998). Thus, the Internet will not positively affect involvement among citizens, because the Internet will be used for entertainment and not political purposes. As the Internet distracts citizens, citizens will have less time to engage in civic behavior, such as joining civic groups or participate in political behavior (see also Boulianne, 2009). In other words, Internet use will lead to a decline in political involvement among citizens. Yet, Boulianne (2009) found in her meta-analysis no evidence for a negative effect of Internet use on involvement. This indicates that finding support for the idea that the Internet contributes to a decline in (political) involvement is unlikely.

The optimistic view: mobilization theories

As opposed to the pessimistic view, mobilization theories believe that Internet use promotes democracy, because the Internet empowers ‘new’ citizens to become politically active (Norris, 2000). Norris (2000) points out that these optimistic scholars claim that online participation is distinctively different from offline participation. The Internet reduces the barriers of political participation, by a) lowering the costs (time and effort), by b) offering opportunities for horizontal and vertical communication that may enrich deliberation (interactivity), by c) dissemination of political information, by d) offering access on demand, by e) offering greater depth about (political) issues as people can search for more information via hyperlinks, and by f) offering new and convenient ways of engaging in political life (Boulianne, 2009; Norris, 2000; Polat, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Tedesco, 2008). These advantages make it easier for citizens to participate in politics. A rationale for the positive relation between Internet use and engagement originates in the rational choice paradigm. The rational choice tradition predicts that when costs are reduced, the chance that citizens participate will increase (Bimber, 2001). Since Internet lowers the cost of participation, mobilization theories argue that it propels citizens to use the Internet for political purposes, and consequently, they can become more involved. Previous studies have supported the mobilization theorists. Scholars found that spending time online is positively associated with civic engagement (Shah et al., 2002), political discussion (Shah et al., 2005), political interest (Boulianne, 2011) and (online) political participation (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Vissers, Hooghe, Stolle, & Mahéo, 2011).

The moderate optimistic or skeptical view: reinforcement

In contrast to the optimistic view, reinforcement theory suggest that Internet use will only benefit those who are already advantaged (Norris, 2000; Polat, 2005). The predictors of Internet use are the same predictors of political involvement, which implicates that the benefits of Internet use will generally be applicable to citizens who are already engaged in political life (Boulianne, 2009). In other words, citizens who are already more politically sophisticated (citizens who are interested, knowledgeable, and already engaged in politics), will also use the Internet for political communication. Especially, since these politically sophisticated citizens can see the implications of political Internet use in their lives (Boulianne, 2009; Polat, 2005). Therefore, the Internet will not reform, but rather normalize or strengthen the existing patterns of political participation (Krueger, 2002; Norris, 2000).

The moderate optimistic or skeptical view is supported by previous studies. Scholars found that online political participation was related to reinforcing social inequalities, in other words, those who are engaged online where also the ones who were highly involved online (Bakker, 2013; Best & Krueger, 2005; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006). Other scholars found that Internet use had no or just had a minimal impact on democracy (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). For example, no relationship between the use of social networking sites and political interest and participation of young adults was found (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). This indicates that Internet use has no impact at all.

Remaining voids and issues in research

In 2009, Shelley Boulianne published a meta-analysis on studies that were focused on the relationship between Internet use and citizen engagement. Although her meta-data does find that Internet use positively affects involvement, she is not certain that Internet use will have a substantial impact on involvement. The average positive effect is small in size. In addition, Boulianne (2009) argues that a lot of studies did not explore causal relationships. It is unclear whether Internet use affects involvement or the other way around. Furthermore, she points out that the effects of Internet use on involvement seem to change across time. She also notes that when online news is used to measure Internet use, the effects on involvement are larger than when other measures are included (Boulianne, 2009). Nonetheless, far too little attention has been paid to the content of online communication (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Previous studies focused on general measures, such as frequency of Internet use or news use. “Conceptualizing and measuring [...] communication and information, rather than the channels through which it flows, are likely to lead to improved insights about how the experiences of digital media use affect political behavior” (Bimber & Copeland, 2013, p. 136).

These gaps in research give directions for this dissertation. First, it is important to study the effects of Internet use on involvement in an era characterized by a more extensive use of Internet in our daily lives (Xenos & Moy, 2007). The studies in this thesis will be examined from 2010 onwards in the Netherlands; this is a period and a country in which almost all citizens use the Internet.

Second, during campaigns, the effects of Internet use may be even more consequential. During elections, citizens make up their minds and cast their ballot. To make a decision, people depend on the media to get informed. As the Internet lowers boundaries to get information or talk about politics, the Internet may facilitate these information needs. Studying the consequences of Internet use during election periods, offers more insight into the effects on political behavior. This will be addressed in this dissertation: The relationship between online political communication and political involvement will be investigated during (Chapter 2 and 3) and outside election campaigns (Chapter 4 and 5). Additionally, change in the effects will be examined using longitudinal panel data with two waves (Chapter 2).

The third void in research relates to the lack in studies that focus on the causal relationships. When studying the consequences of Internet use it is essential to examine causality. Otherwise, making claims about the effect of political Internet use would be inadequate, because the direction of the effects could not be untangled (Boulianne, 2009). Therefore, this dissertation will examine causal relationships by using panel data with multiple waves (Chapter 2) and three experiments (Chapter 4 and 5).

Lastly, since we already know that general online news use has positive consequences for civic life (Boulianne, 2009; Shah et al., 2005), it is important to look beyond the effects of online news usage and focus on more specific forms of online political communication (e.g., Twitter use or visiting a party website). For that reason, we will look beyond the effect of general news usage and focus on specific forms of online political communication (Chapter 2 and 3) and the content characteristics of Internet use (Chapter 3, 4 and 5).

The previous discussion leads to four initial research questions. These initial research questions will be used as a starting point of this dissertation. Answering these questions will offer a broad overview of the effects of the use of different forms of political Internet usage, by giving a first indication *how many* citizens use Internet for political purposes, *which* citizens and with *what* effect. Moreover, it will be examined whether the use of *different forms* (i.e., political Twitter use, reading online political comments, or emailing a politician) has consequences for citizens’ involvement into politics. Answers to the research questions give a preliminary understanding into the reach of online political communication and it addresses the theoretical debate about the consequences of political Internet use.

RQ1. *How many citizens use the Internet for political purposes?*

RQ2. *Which citizens use the Internet for political purposes?*

RQ3. *What are the effects of different forms of political Internet use on citizens’ political involvement?*

RQ4. *Are the effects of different forms of political Internet use on citizens’ political involvement stronger for more politically interested citizens than for less politically interested citizens?*

After the initial four research questions are answered, this dissertation addresses the main voids and issues that have been pointed out in previous research more specifically. This will be explained in greater detail in the following section.

FORM AND CONTENT OF ONLINE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: TWO KEY CHARACTERISTICS

When studying the effects of a given (mass) medium, it is often believed that the influence is caused by the form (in general) *and* content (more specific) of a particular medium (Eveland, 2003; McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991). For example, viewing television has specific consequences, but also the advertisement shown on television has specific and maybe different consequences (Eveland, 2003). Previous research, however, made “little effort [...] to discuss what it is about mass media that is producing effect[s]” (Eveland; 2003, p. 396). This is also a major limitation in research on the consequences of online political communication and, more importantly, in the development of theory about the impact of the Internet. As online technologies are rapidly converging and changing (Polat, 2005), it is important to examine not only different forms of Internet use, but also its content characteristics. Moreover, by investigating *how* citizens use the Internet next to *how many* or *how often* citizens use Internet (Shah et al., 2005), the theoretical knowledge about the relationship between Internet use and involvement can be advanced. In this dissertation, the form and the content of online political

communication will be studied. Especially since previous research pointed out that the relationship between various forms of online political communication (form and maybe also content) is dynamic: effects can be positive and negative (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Hence, different forms of political Internet use will be examined (i.e., how many citizens use the Internet, see Chapter 2) and subsequently the effects of specific characteristics of the Internet will be considered (i.e., how citizens use the Internet, Chapter 3, 4 and 5).

Because Eveland (2003) concludes that media is multidimensional (has multiple content characteristics, that can be identified by theorists and researchers), two key content characteristics of online political communication will be examined: interactivity and political personalization. Both characteristics are regarded as key features of online communication (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Vergeer et al., 2013). It will be investigated how these two key characteristics affect involvement. In addition, according to the Mix of Attributes Approach, these different characteristics can also interact with one another (Eveland, 2003). It is, therefore, necessary to not only examine the main effects of these characteristics, but also the interaction effects: will the different content characteristics strengthen or rather weaken the effects. Examining the mix of content characteristics of online political communication can, thereby, “potentially revitalize the study of media effects and bring a measure of recognition and independence to the field of mass communication” (Eveland, 2003, p. 408). This will be done in Chapter 4 and 5 of this dissertation. I will now turn towards the specific content characteristics interactivity and political personalization.

Interactivity

Interactivity makes online media fundamentally different from offline media. Interactivity can be operationalized in many different ways (Lee & Shin, 2012; Liu & Shrum, 2002; Sundar et al., 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005), but one often used definition is the one introduced by Liu and Schrum’s (2002): “The degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized” (p. 54). Television enables one-to-many communication, but Internet has a unique function: It enables many-to-many communication, it lacks gatekeepers (such as journalists) and it offers its users the possibility to respond immediately, which results in reciprocal communication between communicators (Tedesco, 2008; Polat, 2005). For that reason, interactivity has often been regarded as the key characteristic of online media. Political communication research has also been repeatedly emphasizing that interactivity is a key characteristic of online political communication (Sundar et al., 2003). In accordance, previous work using content analyses of online political communication empirically shows that interactivity is indeed an important characteristic of political communication on the web (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Schweitzer, 2008; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006).

To understand the role the Internet plays in affecting involvement, this dissertation incorporate Internet’s most prominent characteristic; interactivity (see Chapter 3, 4 and 5). In addition, this dissertation also focuses on two distinct phenomena of

interactivity: interactivity-as-product and interactivity-as-process (Stromer-Galley, 2004). The former entails communication between people and computers or networks. More specifically, interactivity-as-product is present when technological features enable users to interact with for example a website by clicking on hyperlinks or to click on a button to become a member of a party. Interactivity-as-process entails communication between individuals. Such interactivity is present when individuals (citizens, politicians, organizations) talk to each other online (Stromer-Galley, 2004). In other words, interactivity-as-process is participating in or observing responsiveness in online communication. Interactivity can be a content characteristic (interactivity-as-product), but a communication style as well (interactivity-as-process). Chapter 4 of this dissertation is focused on interactivity-as-product and interactivity-as-process and Chapter 3 and 5 on interactivity-as-process.

Political personalization

The second characteristic of online political communication is political personalization. Political personalization can be operationalized in many different ways as well (Adam & Maier, 2010; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007; Van Aelst, Sheaffer, & Stanyer, 2012; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). Generally, political personalization is defined as a shift of focus from parties and organizations to candidates and leaders; individual politicians are (increasingly) portrayed as private persona (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Political personalization is one of the key concepts in research on political news coverage (Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012), but political personalization is also especially present in online and social media. “Politicians themselves can now easily publish their opinions on personal websites, weblogs, micro-blogging sites and social networking sites without any third party assistance (e.g. party officials) or interference (e.g. journalists)” (Vergeer et al., 2013, p. 480). The increasing use of personally kept web platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook) seem to advance personalization in politics. But, in addition, the way politicians communicate, seem to enhance personalization as well (Vergeer et al., 2013). The online communication style politician’s use is often characterized by sending messages about what occupies them from a more personal perspective (Vergeer et al., 2013).

In general, personalization exists in the presence of politicians in online media platforms in addition to their parties, but also in the messages they convey. This makes personalization also one of the key concepts in research on the effects of Internet and it is therefore, used in this dissertation as a key characteristic of online political communication (see Chapter, 3, 4 and 5). Personalization can also be technologically divided into two forms. On the one hand, personalization can be present on the Internet because of authorship (politicians are the ‘owner’ of the online platform, e.g. social media). On the other hand, personalization can be present within the communication itself, for example in the biographies that are included in the online content or by way of communicating about, for instance, the politicians’ private life. In that sense, in a similar fashion as interactivity, personalization can be a content characteristic and a communication style. In chapter 4, we will focus on personalization as a content characteristic and a communication style. In chapter 3 and 5, we will focus on personalization as a communication style.

Given the fact that the two characteristics of online political communication are now identified, the remaining part of this section will introduce the last three research questions of this dissertation.

- RQ5. *To what extent are political personalization and interactivity indeed key content characteristics of online political communication?*
- RQ6. *To what extent do the content characteristics of online political communication (i.e., political personalization and interactivity) affect citizens' political involvement?*
- RQ7. *Why do the content characteristics of online political communication (i.e., political personalization and interactivity) affect citizens' political involvement?*

RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis draws upon a multi-method design. The conceptual model of this dissertation combines longitudinal panel data, content analysis, secondary data and several experiments. This combination of different methods offers a more elaborative and thorough investigation into the specific and different effects of online political communication. In the following, it is explained why different research methods are applied.

Longitudinal panel multi-wave data

Longitudinal panel survey data is used to offer an explorative and first insight into the consequences of different forms of online political communication. In addition, panel data with multiple waves is a state-of-the-art method in communication science. More specifically, the first two research questions (how many and which citizens use the Internet for political purposes) will be addressed. By utilizing survey data with a representative sample, political Internet use in society at large can be examined. Secondly, it is examined to what extent this usage affects citizens' political involvement (see RQ3) and whether this effect is conditional (i.e., RQ4, the effect is more pronounced for citizens with higher levels of political interest). The panel data with two waves enables us to examine these research questions in an advanced way. This study contributes to Boulianne's (2009) recommendation to examine the causal relationships more closely. It also addresses her point that the consequences and uses of the Internet for political purposes can increase over time. Data for this study was collected during the Dutch national elections of 2010.

Content analyses

After employing an explorative investigating into the consequences of different forms of online political communication, in the next step, the content characteristics of online political communication will be examined. As mentioned before, by investigating *which* characteristics of online political communication cause effects, instead of the *form* of online political communication, the theoretical knowledge about the relationship

between Internet use and involvement could be advanced. Previous research emphasized that when different attributes or characteristics of a medium are examined; one specific research design should be applied (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012). Dylko and McCluskey (2012) point out that "researchers should proceed by (a) identifying relevant attributes, then (b) use quantitative content analyses to document which of these attributes exist in the medium of interest, and conclude by (c) experiments validating or rejecting theorized effects of various attributes." (p. 255). A similar approach is applied in this dissertation. In this chapter the relevant content characteristics are identified. By using a manual and automatic content analyses of online political communication on a social networking site (i.e., Twitter), it will be identified which content characteristics exists and whether interactivity and political personalization are indeed key characteristics of online political communication. Data for this study (Tweets from political candidates) was collected during the Dutch national elections of 2010. Therefore, this study functions as a starting point for the effect studies and addresses the fifth research question. The effects studies (part c) will be explained in the next section.

Secondary voting data

To begin studying the effects of the main content characteristics of online political communication, the Twitter data and the results of the content analyses will be combined with actual voting data. Because the Twitter data can be combined with an existing outcome measure (i.e., the preferential votes each candidates receives during an election), this study offers a first insight into the electoral effects of the use of Twitter and the effects of the way in which Twitter is used. The study moves beyond self-reported measures and addresses research question six (i.e., the extent to which political personalization and interactivity affect citizens' political involvement).

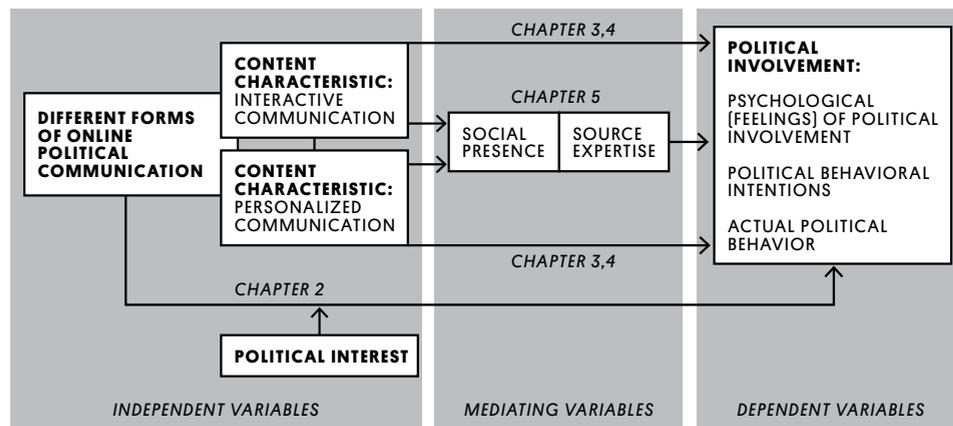
Experiments

This dissertation uses three experiments to test more specifically the consequences of online political communication. In particular, the experiments examine research question six and seven. Experiments are especially suitable, because they help establish cause and effect (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). This was a major deficit in previous research on the effects of online political communication (Boulianne, 2009). Moreover, as experiments allow researchers to have control over the content participants are exposed to, it can be examined *what it is about online political communication* that produces effects (Eveland, 2003). The content characteristics interactivity and personalization can be manipulated, which offers comprehension about the specific effects of online political communication. Hence, as proposed by the Mix of Attributes Approach (Eveland, 2003), the combined effect of these two different content characteristics can be studied as well. Lastly, experiments permit replication (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011): Because different practices of the experimental method were applied (i.e., a scenario experiment, a laboratory experiment and an online experiment), it can be ensured that the conclusions of this dissertation are not somehow unique (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

DISSERTATION OUTLINE

This dissertation consists of four separate studies (see Figure 1.1). Each chapter documents one study and the chapters are self-containing. The chapters are presented as empirical articles that contain abstracts, theoretical foundations, methods, results and separate conclusions and discussions. Below, it is explained how the chapters are related. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 will examine the usage, the users, the content characteristics, the conditional and direct effects of online political communication, and finally, Chapter 5 will investigate the underlying processes of that relationship.

Figure 1.1 The Conceptual Framework of the Dissertation.



This dissertation will start with an explorative study on the consequences of different forms of online political communication on citizens' political involvement. With the advantage of longitudinal data with two waves, **Chapter 2** investigates how many citizens use the Internet for political purposes (RQ1) and, more importantly, which citizens (RQ2). This answers fundamental questions regarding the *mobilization and reinforcement* debate (Hirzalla, Van Zoonen, & De Ridder, 2011; Norris, 2000). Will the Internet merely attract those citizens who are already politically involved, in other words, the 'usual suspects' (Polat, 2005), or will it mobilize new citizens? Once this initial question is answered, the chapter examines the relationship between different forms of political Internet use and citizens' political involvement (RQ3). The study differentiates between active and passive forms of political Internet use. Also the conditional effects will be examined (RQ4). Moreover, it investigates whether political Internet use is beneficial for those citizens who are already interested in politics, because they have the 'skills' to participate, or that it will engage 'new' citizens. This study offers a wide overview and insight into the different forms of political Internet use and the consequences for citizens.

Following this explorative investigation, the dissertation moves from specific online forms that can be used for political communication to the most important characteristics

of these forms. First, by using a content analysis, **Chapter 3** examines whether the two most important characteristics of online political communication, more personalized communication (a focus on an individual politician and his private life) and the use of interactive features, are present in an online medium that is used for political communication during an election campaign (i.e., Twitter; RQ5). It also assesses whether the use of that specific medium (i.e., Twitter) by candidates resulted in more electoral support (preferential votes; RQ3). In addition, the study examines whether the style of communicating (the two characteristics; interactivity and personalization) matters (RQ6). These analyses give us more insight into the real world consequences of online political communication and are a unique addition to the self-reported measures of political involvement in Chapter 2.

Although Chapter 3 uses a novel approach to examine the effects of online political communication, in addition, the direction of the relationship will be examined using experimental studies. By using two different experimental methods, a scenario experiment and a laboratory experiment using actual websites, **Chapter 4** examines whether more personalized online communication and the use of interactive features increases political involvement among citizens. In a scenario experiment, participants were asked to imagine that they were exposed to a website, while in a laboratory experiment participants actually visited a website. Furthermore, in accordance with the Mix of Attributes Approach (Eveland, 2003) it also tests the assumption whether the combined effect of personalization and interactivity enhances political involvement among citizens (RQ 6).

Taken together, the previous chapters focus on the (conditional) effects of political Internet use more general, and the effects of interactivity and personalization more explicitly. However, little is known about why online political communication (i.e., interactive and personalized communication) affects citizens' involvement in politics. What are the underlying processes that explain the positive effects of online political communication? In **Chapter 5**, again the relationship between communication styles (i.e., again personalized and interactive communication) and political involvement is investigated (RQ6). Yet, in this final experiment, the underlying mechanisms are examined as well (RQ7). By integrating theories from marketing and computer-mediated communication research (i.e., social presence and source expertise theory), Chapter 5 contributes to the scholarly work by advancing the understanding of the consequences of interactive and personalized online communication and the mechanisms that explain the effects. To conclude, in the last and final chapter of this dissertation, **Chapter 6**, the theoretical and political implications of the four studies will be discussed.

Taken together, this dissertation investigates whether the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics. This objective is important as the debate about the effects of Internet use for political purposes continues. Several studies have examined the effects of political Internet use, but voids and issues in research continue to exist. To my knowledge, previous research has only sporadically examined causal relationships, nor has it focused on different forms and characteristics of online political communication. Knowledge about the extent to which Internet use with its 'new' communication technologies mobilizes citizens to become involved, and

in turn, serve democratic ends, is of great importance. “[D]emocracy is unthinkable without the ability of citizens to participate freely” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 1). The Internet might contribute to political participation and involvement of citizens. Yet, this dissertation will show to what extent

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