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

Kruikemeier, S.

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CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

“What a fascinating time for political communication researchers. Rarely do we get to witness the launch of a medium with such broad and sweeping potential to change significantly communication behavior”. (Tedesco, 2008, p. 507)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A debate about the Internet’s consequences continues to exist. Some scholars are positive and believe that the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy. However, others disagree and fear that the Internet has negative consequences for political life. This dissertation dealt with this important unresolved debate in political communication research. It examines whether the Internet contributes to the quality of democracy by strengthening political involvement or whether it will lead to a decline in political involvement (Boulianne, 2009). Over the past two decades, scholarly work repeatedly found inconsistent results (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). Research sporadically explored causal relationships, did not often examine changes in Internet use across time, nor has it investigated the specific form and content characteristics of online political communication, or empirically tested the underlying mechanisms (Boulianne, 2009). This thesis filled these voids and adds substantially to the knowledge about how and why political Internet use serves democratic ends. Moreover, the dissertation contributes to the communication and political science literature on media effects by offering an in-depth investigation of the consequences of online political communication for citizens’ political involvement.

In this final chapter, I describe the main findings and conclusions of the research presented in this dissertation by answering the research questions. In addition, theoretical and practical implications will be reported. Finally, this chapter identifies areas for future research and provides concluding remarks.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

This dissertation started with two research questions that together give insight into the use and users of online political communication. Answers to these research questions form the starting point of this dissertation. It was questioned *how many* and *which citizens* use the Internet for political purposes. Answering these two questions offer a broad overview of the possible reach and impact of political Internet use. Moreover, by giving a first indication of how many citizens use the Internet for political purposes and which citizens, fundamental questions regarding the *mobilization and reinforcement* debate can be answered (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?

In general, Chapter 2 shows, in line with earlier studies (Bakker, 2013; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006), that *few citizens participate in politics online. Some forms of political Internet usage are more popular (passive forms) than others (active forms), and the people who use the Internet for such purposes are often those who are already engaged in politics.* This conclusion seems to support the skeptical view.

So generally speaking, the use of the Internet for political purposes is low. However, this does not mean that the use of the Internet for political purposes is insignificant. Some specific forms of Internet use for political purposes are popular and younger citizens are more likely to use the Internet for political reasons. More specifically, the use of Vote Advice Applications (VAA’s) is quite popular; one out of every four (see Chapter 2), and in 2012, one out of every three citizens (Kruikemeier, et al. 2013), uses a VAA during an election period. In addition, visiting political websites or reading online comments under news articles is also a rather common activity among citizens.

In addition, this dissertation shows that younger citizens are more likely to use the Internet for political purposes. An interesting finding, since it has often been argued and demonstrated that younger citizens are generally not interested or involved in politics (Best & Krueger, 2005; Delli Carpini, 2000; Putnam, 2000). An explanation for this observation is that younger citizens have usually more Internet skills than their older counterparts. This might explain why younger citizens are more inclined, and have the ability, to take part in online political activities (Best & Krueger, 2005). But, of course, not only their skills are of great importance, younger citizens should also be motivated to take part in politics (Best & Krueger, 2005). When younger citizens have the motivation to do so, their already existing Internet skills mobilizes them towards greater political involvement. This notion is supported by recent studies. For instance, scholars (using panel data with multiple waves) found that social media use for political purposes is higher among younger citizens, and social media use for political purposes positively predicts political interest and political participation (Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013). It seems that social media use can thus have a significant impact: If youngsters can be motivated to take part in online political communication on social networks sites, for example by adjusting or tailoring online political communication to a younger audience (Möller, 2013), citizens can be mobilized into politics. In that case, Internet may function as a true mobilizer for a ‘new’ generation.

The motivations to become politically active online can also come from another angle. Younger citizens are often more active on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, than older citizens. Online social networks are generally larger and heterogeneous (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008); they are a collection of ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973). Granovetter already argued in 1973 that: “weak ties, far from creating alienation [...] are actually vital for an individual’s integration into modern society” (p. 203). In other words, “[w]eakly-tied persons, while less likely to share resources, provide access to more diverse types of resources because each person operates in different social networks and has access to different resources” (Garton et al., 1997, Units of Analysis, para. 7). It is tempting to believe that larger networks are an assembly of artificial friendships, but due to the access to a large social network of weak ties, they help obtain new resources (Garton et al., 1997; Steinfield et al., 2008). For instance, research found that social networking sites contributed to the likelihood of coming across different political viewpoints (Kim, 2011). Others added that online political discussion networks are often wider than discussion on non-political topics; for instance, more people participate in these discussions (González-Bailón, Kaltenbrunner, & Banchs, 2010). Work in Chapter 2 found that citizens who use the Internet for political purposes are often interested in politics. These highly involved users might have a greater role in the dissemination of political communication online, because they can function as a ‘network hub’. These hubs are likely to disperse political information or mobilize other citizens via their online networks (Eveland, Hutchens, & Morey, 2013). Also others emphasize this idea: ‘influentials’ (those who are often central in a online network and are likely to reach a bigger audience) and ‘broadcasters’ (those who often ‘send’ messages) have specific network positions that allow them to reach larger audiences (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2013). As online social networks of younger citizens are larger and heterogeneous, it can be expected that there is a far greater chance that information from a ‘political hub’ also reaches less interested younger citizens. Less politically interested citizens could then, in turn, be influenced by that political information, which could mobilize them to become politically active. This rationale relates also to the classical theory of the two-step flow of communication (Bakker, 2013): information will flow from a sender to one person (a hub), and in turn to others. The information could also reach less active citizens (Katz, 1957).

In sum, answering the question *how many* and *which* citizens use the Internet for political purposes, tends to lend support for the reinforcement/normalization thesis (Hirzalla et al., 2011; Norris, 2000). Overall, Internet use is low, but the low percentage is by no means hopeless. Even if just five percent of the electorate uses a particular form of online communication, it is still considerable. I agree that these participating citizens are the ones who are already involved in political life, but they might have a greater role in the dissimulation of political communication online. Also, the finding that younger citizens engage more in online political activities bodes hopes for the future. In addition, finding out how many and which citizens use the Internet for political purposes offers context for the effect questions. Insight into the reach of online political communication put the consequences in perspective.

INTERNET’S CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY: THE EFFECTS ON CITIZEN’S INVOLVEMENT

I now move towards the heart of the dissertation, by answering the ‘effect’ questions. By moving towards the ‘effect’ questions, inherently the main research question of this dissertation will be answered: to what extent does the Internet contribute to democracy by fostering citizens’ involvement in politics? But first, I will answer the third till sixth research question. In short, the third and fourth research question focus on the direct and conditional effects of different forms of political Internet usages. The fifth and sixth research questions focus on the effects of the key content characteristics of online political communication. The seventh research question will then be discussed. Since it is expected that a relationship between interactive, personalized communication and involvement will be found, the last research question reads as follows: Why do the content characteristics of online political communication (i.e., political personalization and interactivity) affect citizens’ political involvement?

Effects of different forms of online political communication

In Chapter 2, the third question of this dissertation (i.e., to what extent do different forms of political Internet use affect citizens’ political involvement) was answered. The results of Chapter 2 showed that the use of only a few specific forms of political Internet use had a positive effect on political involvement. More specifically, the results indicate that citizens who use an online VAA or read the comments below online political articles during the election period are more likely to vote or to feel more interested in politics than those who do not. In addition, Chapter 3 showed that the use of Twitter by political candidates affects electoral outcomes. These results support the second main finding; *some specific forms of Internet usage have a positive effect on interest and political behavior*. Interestingly, Chapter 2 also found that citizens who write political comments are less likely to vote. It may well be that these citizens are more cynical about politics, especially because these comments are often negative and sarcastic in nature.

The fourth research question asked whether the effects of different forms of political Internet use on citizens’ political involvement were stronger for more politically interested citizens than for less politically interested citizens. According to the reinforcement literature, politically interested or active citizens have more resources (e.g., civic skills) that allow them to benefit from the advantages provided by the Internet (Best & Krueger, 2005). In other words, the Internet will mainly affect those citizens who are already politically sophisticated and will have less of an effect on those who are not.

Chapter 2 did not find that the positive effect of both active and passive forms of political Internet use on political participation is more prevalent for citizens with higher levels of political interest. Instead, for two specific forms of political Internet use, the opposite is observed: the positive effect of these two forms of political Internet use is more prevalent for less politically interested citizens. Chapter 2 showed that reading political comments and using Twitter for political purposes mobilizes less interested citizens. Due to technological developments and growing experience with the Internet, the resource argument is becoming less relevant. It is more likely that less interested citizens

will benefit from different forms of political Internet use because they can be mobilized, while highly interested citizens are already mobilized.

Taken together, it seems that the effects of political Internet use are diverse and can be negative as well. In addition, Chapter 2 did not find support for the notion that Internet benefits more engaged citizens. In fact, the opposite happens. The gap between engaged citizens and the ones who are not does not become wider. Generally, the effects partly support all different views in the debate: mobilization, reinforcement/normalization and the pessimistic view. Although addressing the effects of different forms of political Internet use is important, the results do not support a theoretical framework to understand different effects (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012). Chapter 2 mainly demonstrates that some forms of online political communication have an effect, whereas others do not. This suggests that certain *characteristics* of the Internet are driving the effect. It might well be that the specific content characteristics of these online platforms mobilize citizens to vote and not the specific form of Internet usage (e.g., social media usage). Therefore, I continue the argumentation line (theoretically and on the basis of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) that it is important not only to consider the different forms (*how many* citizens use different online media) but also to consider the content-specific factors (*how* citizens use the Internet) in investigating the effects of Internet use on citizen involvement.

Effects of the content characteristics of online political communication

The previous discussion pointed out that the effects of different forms of political Internet use tend to be ‘fuzzy’. To gain more insight into the consequences of online media in changing democratic practices (Albrecht, 2006; Eveland, 2003), this dissertation turned towards the specific characteristics or attributes of online communication. In chapter 1, two key content characteristics of online political communication were identified: interactivity and political personalization (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). In chapter 3, quantitative content analyses was used to test whether these characteristics are actually present in online political communication and in Chapter 4 and 5, experiments were used to find out whether the theorized effects were actually there.

Chapter 3 investigated the communication styles of political campaigning by candidates on a social networking site (i.e., Twitter). The results of Chapter 3 showed that above other topics in the Tweets (e.g., reference to news or political issues), Twitter was mainly used as a vehicle to talk about candidates’ private persona. Additionally, Twitter is used to communicate in an interactive way. Engaging in an interactive conversation, by responding to other people is a popular style of communicating on Twitter. The results from Chapter 3 are consistent with those of other (content analyses) studies (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Schweitzer, 2008; Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006) and support the general observation that interactivity and personalization are indeed key characteristics of online political communication (Sundar et al., 2003; Vergeer et al., 2013).

I will now turn to the experimental evidence on the effects of the two key content characteristics of online political communication. Chapter 3 shows that interactive

communication use by a political candidate on Twitter positively affects the amount of votes he or she receives. In addition, Chapter 4 shows that personalization and interactivity presented on political websites have also a positive effect on citizens’ political involvement. In accordance with previous studies (Tedesco, 2007), citizens who visited a website that was more focused on an individual politician or contained more interactive features, felt more politically involved than citizens who visited a website focused on a political party or did not contain interactive features. Additionally, following the Mix of Attribute Approach (Eveland, 2003), the combined effect of personalized, interactive online political communication was investigated. Both studies that were reported in Chapter 4 showed that the combination of the two characteristics yielded an even stronger positive effect on citizens’ involvement than when taken separately. In other words, interactivity and personalization strengthen each other. Chapter 5 found again similar results. Although the study presented in Chapter 5 examines different mediators, the results showed that individualized and privatized communication styles on Twitter (and in addition their combined effect) positively affect citizens’ political involvement.

The research that has been conducted in Chapter 5 builds upon the findings in Chapter 4 by examining possible explanations for the effects of personalization and interactivity. By discovering underlying processes or mechanisms, 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. In addition, this chapter adds to the scholarly work on the consequences of political personalization. This Chapter differentiated between depersonalized (focus on party), individualized (focus on politician) and privatized (focus on politician and his or her private life) communication (Van Aelst et al. 2012), instead of the broader distinction between no personalization and personalization. The results revealed that exposure to interactive communication will lead to a stronger sense of interpersonal contact with (perceived social presence), and perceived professionalization of the communicator (perceived source expertise), which, in turn, positively affects political involvement. Additionally, Chapter 5 found that individualized and/or privatized communication styles on Twitter have a positive effect on citizens’ political involvement via the two mediating processes, but the findings are less distinct as for interactivity. Still, these findings indicate that social presence and source expertise are two important underlying mechanisms that explain the positive effects of the Internet. Overall, it seems that the Internet enhances strong psychological connectedness with politics and using Internet makes politics appear more professionalized.

In sum, the third main finding of this dissertation is; *interactivity and personalization are key characteristics of online political communication and they both affect citizens’ political involvement*. Additionally, the fourth main finding of this dissertation is: *feelings of social presence and source expertise are two important processes that explain the positive effects of online political communication*. By taking the last three studies into account, this dissertation supports the mobilization theories. Although the effects are sometimes small, they contribute significantly to citizens’ involvement in politics. Perhaps the major question that now arises is what these findings mean. This will be answered in the next section. In the next and last part of this chapter, I will explain the theoretical and practical implications of this dissertation.

IMPLICATION FOR THEORY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation contributes to the development of theory regarding the effects of online political communication in important ways. First, this dissertation provides insight into the theoretical knowledge about the relationship between Internet use and involvement. It does so, as mentioned in the previous section, by examining the specific characteristics of new media. Previous research asserts that: “With a deluge of novel media forms emerging regularly, researchers have no systematic theoretical media effects framework [...]” (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 254). This dissertation contributes in this regard by identifying the key characteristics of online political communication (interactivity and political personalization), by documenting their existence (content analyses) and by validating the expected results (effects of interactivity and personalization on political involvement). With regard to the effects of interactivity, this dissertation shows that communicating in an interactive way on different online platforms by political candidates and parties enhances political involvement among citizens. With regard to the effects of personalization, this dissertation shows that communicating in a personalized way on different online platforms enhances political involvement among citizens as well. These findings demonstrate that a focus on the content characteristics of new media, and not the forms (e.g., Twitter use or emailing a politician) help us to understand media effects better, especially in an era where new online platforms come and grow (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), or go and lose popularity (e.g., Hyves and MySpace). Scholars will not continuously reinvent “the theoretical wheel” (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012, p. 271).

Second, this dissertation adds to the growing body of literature that shows that interactivity is a key characteristic that is often the driving force behind the positive effects of new media. Marketing literature already found that interactivity used in commercial websites has positive consequences on attitudes (Coyle & Thorson, 2001; Teo, Oh, Liu, & Wei, 2003), website involvement and purchase intention (Jiang, Chan, Tan, & Chua, 2010). Others found that interactivity used on Twitter by organizations positively influences perceived relationships between the organization and its public (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013). This shows that the effects of interactivity are not context dependent and are largely applicable to other contexts (in this case political communication) and across different platforms (e.g., Twitter, blogs, commenting). Therefore, the results of this study can be translated to other research fields as well. For instance, interactivity is likely to be present in other online platforms (e.g., LinkedIn and Instagram) and it is interesting to see whether similar effects will be found.

Third, this dissertation is among the first to study the effects of different aspects of political personalization. The literature on the effects of personalization is limited and the evidence is inconsistent. Some scholars found that personalization has positive effects on policy support (Han, 2009) and interest (Lee & Oh, 2012), while others found that personalization leads to political cynicism (Jebiril, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2013) and disbelief in politicians (Otto & Maier, 2013). This dissertation shows in three different experimental studies that personalization positively influences political involvement. More importantly, this dissertation also points out that personalization does not consist of one dimension. In accordance with others (Van Aelst, Sheaffer, & Stanyer,

2012; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), I want to emphasize that personalization has multiple aspects. Both individualization and privatization are important sub dimensions or aspects of political personalization. Individualization is purely the difference between a focus on an individual politician (individualized communication) rather than on a party (depersonalized communication). Privatization means that the communication is focused on a politician’s private life (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Following Van Aelst et al. (2012), privatization entails communication about a politician’s family-life, past life (e.g., upbringing), leisure time and love life. Chapter 4 examined the effects of personalization in general (both aspects of personalization) and Chapter 5 adds to this by examining the effects of the two aspects of personalization. Because Chapter 5 found that the effects of the different aspects of personalization can vary (see Chapter 5), it is important that in future research on the effects of personalization in, for example an offline context, these aspects are taken into consideration.

There is, however, an important question that should be answered in future investigations. It is unknown whether the ‘product’ characteristics matter or rather the ‘process’ characteristics of both interactivity and personalization. More specifically, according to Stromer-Galley (2004), interactivity can be seen as a product and a process. Interactivity-as-product entails communication between people and computers or networks (e.g., the use of hyperlinks or contact buttons). Interactivity-as-product entails communication between individuals (e.g., direct online conversations between a politician and a citizen). Thus, interactivity can be a content characteristic (a product), but a communication style as well (a process). This is also true for personalization. Political personalization can be present within the communication itself, for example a politician is the account holder of an online media platform (a product) or by way of communicating about, for instance, the politicians’ private life (a process). Just as interactivity, personalization can be a content characteristic (the communication stems from a politician) and a communication style (communicating in a personal way). Although this dissertation examined the content characteristics as well as the communication styles used in online political communication and it is very likely that both phenomena enhance positive effects, it is possible that the effects can also be different (e.g., communicating in a personal way might enhance more intimacy with a politician than just visiting a politicians website). It would be interesting to assess effects of content characteristic (product) versus communication style (process) in future research.

Fourth, although the link between the Internet, political involvement and democracy has drawn the attention of numerous scholars (Polat, 2005), the theoretical knowledge about why the Internet affects political involvement is scarce. Hardly any research investigated which mechanisms explain the effects of online political communication. This dissertation fills this void. This dissertation integrates well-known theories from marketing and computer-mediated communication research: social presence and source expertise theory. Both theories are particularly suitable for explaining the effects of social media use on political involvement, because they have been applied in marketing research to explain the relationship between advertisement on the web and web advertising effectiveness (Choi & Rifon, 2002; Fortin & Dholakia, 2005). In some regard, online political communication can be seen as a form of political marketing (strategy).

By using online political communication, politicians and parties try to inform citizens, but they also try to persuade voters to support the party or to vote for them. From this point of view, the marketing theories are applicable to the political context. Also, more recent studies emphasize that ‘perceived social presence’ is an important psychological mechanism that often explains Internet’s positive effects (Lee & Shin, 2012; Lee & Jang, 2013; Lee & Oh, 2012). Further work needs to be done to establish whether other underlying processes explain Internet’s effects. Moreover, it is important to gain more understanding of all mediating factors that are relevant in the online context. For instance, factors such as psychological nearness between communication partners could matter (see Electronic Propinquity Theory, Walther & Bazarova, 2008). But also flow experiences and transportation might come in play (Green & Brock, 2000; Van Noort, Voorveld, & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Examining these underlying processes offer in an interesting venue for future studies.

Fifth, this dissertation was focused on different facets of political involvement. The dependent variable focused on psychological (feelings of) political involvement, political behavioral intentions and actual political behaviors. Although this dissertation by no means focused on the measurement of involvement, it seems that online political communication affects various facets of political involvement. It affects ‘soft’ measures of political involvement (e.g., feelings, interest and intended behavior), but also ‘hard’ measures of political involvement (e.g., actual voting behavior). This dissertation puts them under the same umbrella of ‘involvement’. It would be interesting, in a future study, to examine the consecutive effects of the different facets of political involvement. For example, does interactive communication affect psychological feelings of involvement (e.g., feeling close to politics), then behavior intentions (e.g., intention to vote), and in the end actual behavior (e.g., actual voting)?

To conclude, while this dissertation offers insights into the direct effect of political communication on involvement, additional research is needed to examine whether there is a significant indirect effect of online political communication via traditional media. It is very plausible that certain online information reaches broader audiences through traditional media. Previous research already found that journalists use various online news sources in their news reporting (Gulyas, 2013). The attention for online sources seems high among journalists. Especially Twitter is a popular news source for journalists (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Journalists are also the ones who often follow politicians on social networking sites. This indicates that online political communication might have a larger indirect effect via traditional media. Traditional news formats are still very popular (Prior, 2003; Wonneberger, 2011) and they have a larger audience. In this light, a broader and maybe less politically interested audience can then be reached. In that case, the Internet may have an even bigger impact on more people.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The work presented in this thesis has also important practical implications for political candidates, political organizations and society at large. First, this dissertation demon-

strates that citizens can be persuaded to vote for a party or specific political candidate. This stresses the importance for political actors and parties to incorporate online communication strategies in political campaigning. First and foremost, political actors and political parties need to be online. In the Netherlands, this is already realized. Political actors see the benefits of online communication through digital platforms and an online presence is standard practice for most parties and candidates. However, previous studies also pointed out that politicians and campaign organizations are sometimes cautious online, because they are afraid to lose control (Carlson, Djupsund, & Strandberg, 2013). Political actors should, however, be responsive and reactive in their online communication to receive positive evaluations or generate votes. It is important to start conversations with or give information directly to citizen, and it is equally and maybe more important to react and respond to citizens online. During campaigns, candidates and political organizations should actually communicate with citizens, instead of just responding to a few citizens (Bor, 2013).

Second, this dissertation made clear that communication in a more personalized way can persuade possible voters as well. The results are less clear-cut than for interactive communication, but personal campaigning (Vergeer et al., 2013), as I pointed out before, has clear benefits. By ‘humanizing’ a political candidate, citizens can perceive candidates as more friendly. Candidates (or their campaign organizations) can do this by showing online that they interact in family life and have hobbies (Bor, 2013). It is however still important for candidates to also portray themselves in a professional light (Bor, 2013), as Chapter 5 shows that a focus on politicians’ private life can lower perceived expertise. I believe that it is important for politician to humanize their persona, without losing their professional image.

Third, not only engaging in an actual conversation with potential voters matters. The results of the dissertation also confirmed that simply observing interactive and personalized conversations might already lead to positive outcomes for politicians and parties. Thus, the use of the Internet may not only be beneficial for a small participating audience, but the communication may also reach a considerable larger group of voters. Campaign organizations, parties and politicians should therefore invest in online political communication, because the dissemination of information might be bigger than only the addressed audience.

Last, this dissertation demonstrates that online political communication can contribute to the model of participatory democracy (Strömbäck, 2008). Citizens who use the Internet for political purposes participate and engage in democracy: they vote more often, participate in online conversations, feel connected with politics, and are more interested in politics. But this does not happen automatically (Putnam, 2000). Citizens are individually responsible to be politically active online. When they are online and use the Internet for political purposes, they can become more involved and participate more in politics, which in turn, fosters democracy. So whether democracy will be strengthened by the Internet depends largely on the fact whether or not citizens feel responsible and are motivated to engage in online activities that are related to politics.

FINAL CONCLUSION: DOES THE INTERNET CONTRIBUTE TO DEMOCRACY?

I will now turn to the main research question of this dissertation; to what extent does online political communication contribute to the quality of democracy by fostering citizens' involvement in politics? Answering this question is certainly no easy task and there are many nuances that should be made. However, in a nutshell, this dissertation shows that few citizens use the Internet for political communication, but some forms are more popular than others. Citizens who then use the Internet for political purposes are often those who are already engaged in politics. Some specific forms of Internet usage have a positive effect on political involvement, but it is mainly the key content characteristics (i.e., interactivity and political personalization) that are the driving force behind the effects. If the communication is personalized and contains interactive features, citizens will be more involved in politics. Such communication makes citizens feel close to politics (social presence) and they perceive the communication as more professional (source expertise).

In general, this dissertation found middle ground between the hopes and fears of Internet's consequences for democracy. In some regards, the Internet does not contribute to the quality of participatory democracy. The reach of online political communication is sometimes low and politically interested citizens are often more likely to participate online. This indicates that a basic requirement of the model of participatory democracy is not met: a large number of people should participate in politics (Strömbäck, 2008). But there are exceptions that should not be overlooked. For instance, the finding that younger citizens engage more in online political activities gives hope for the future. In addition, this dissertation shows that when online political communication is interactive and includes personalization, this positively affects citizens' political involvement. In this regard, the Internet does contribute to the participatory model of democracy (Strömbäck, 2008). The effects are often small, but one would also not expect a huge impact.

Taken together, it seems that the debate between the optimistic, pessimistic and skeptical scholars is outdated. There is not one side of the debate that is fully supported by research presented in this dissertation and research on the consequences of the Internet for democracy in general. Moreover, this dissertation point out that the question *to what extent does the Internet contributed to democracy* is too generic. Instead, future researchers should ask more specific questions about Internet's consequences. In others words, it is now important to move beyond the debate and put emphasis on focused research questions. Such research questions should focus on the characteristics of new media, its specific consequences and its various underlying mechanisms. For instance, which content characteristics of online political communication are consequential for which kind of people? Or which aspect of interactivity (product or process) is effecting political involvement?

To conclude, I agree with the proposition that "scholars [might] placed too heavy a burden of expectations on the Internet" (Tedesco, 2008, p. 518). Finding small positive changes might be an optimistic result after all. There is only one important and rather

fundamental precondition: the Internet *should* be used for political purposes otherwise the Internet will certainly have no impact. So in the end, the first sentence of this dissertation sums it all up: "[t]he most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it" (Putnam, 2000, p. 180). Only if the Internet is actually used for political purposes by citizens, Internet will serve democratic ends.

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