The Internet: Friend or Foe of Youth Political Participation[1]

Henry Milner
Henry.Milner@Umontreal.ca

Presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Political Science Association, Carleton University, Ottawa, May 26-29, 2009

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I provide an overview of what we know of the effect of growing up into the world of the Internet upon the political participation of young people. This is an area on which there is a great deal of recent, varied literature but no consensus. This is because the Internet (i.e. the combination of the personal computer, digitalization and the high-speed Internet) is like nothing else we have encountered. It is a new medium of information alongside newspapers, radio and television – but it is also a new medium of communication that has transformed every existing form of communication. Indeed, a commonly used terminology terms the phenomenon as ICT (information and communications technology).

As a medium of information, it is sometimes compared to television, but the analogy only begins to hold at all with the arrival of the remote control device (RCT) and the expansion of viewing options through cable and, then, satellite transmission. Prior (2007:126) argues that the choice presented by cable fundamentally altered the effect of TV watching on political knowledge and political participation. His data shows that the "political knowledge of respondents without access to cable or Internet is unrelated to their degree of preference for entertainment. For those with access to cable television, on the other hand, moving from low to high entertainment preference corresponds to a 20 percent drop in political knowledge". Observers have found that pre-RCT generations are more deliberate when they choose what to watch, typically tuning in with a specific programming goal in mind (Bellamy and Walker 1996). In a process analogous to newspaper readers interested in sports or entertainment being exposed to news, earlier generations developed TV watching habits that made them close to if not quite captive audiences for the network news telecast. Many television watchers were thus exposed to coverage of political news and events because they simply did not wish to switch turn the channel (Bellamy and Walker 1996).[2]

The arrival of the RCT, Video Cassettes, and the personal channel repertoires that cable and satellite providers offered subscribers resulted in a situation that allowed viewers, with minimal or no effort, to avoid political news. The result, notes Prior (2007), was a deeper political knowledge gap between those who pursue news and those who avoid it, a gap that could only grow with the arrival of a far more powerful range of avoidance devices. The fundamental shift in information dissemination was from an externally imposed order (within which, in a democratic society, the individual can exercise choice) to one where the content is internally selected, ordered and, potentially, created. The former is characteristic of the linear logic of the newspaper, but also traditional radio and television, especially where the public interest media play an important role.

In a sense, then, the arrival of the Internet brings a further extension of the effects of the RCT and multi-channel universe, except that this latest transformation in information and communications technology revolutionary is comprehensive and multi-dimensional in character. Here we have a simultaneous and integrated transformation of the very nature of the content (which is not merely sound, as in the telephone, or text and graphics as in the newspaper, or pictures and video - but all of them together, and in much higher resolution. With the RCT you can easily exit, i.e. leave the boring (sic)

news program; with the Internet you have the ready option of flipping to a wide range of less boring ones.

Despite this, many observers are persuaded that the availability of such unlimited unbounded content means that, overall, the Internet fosters greater political communication and political knowledge, and, therefore political participation. But for every such Internet celebrator, there is at least one other who fears its effect will be to reinforce the participation gap between the engaged and the dropouts, to widen the "digital divide. This was the conclusion of a survey conducted early in 2007 of some 1200 Internet specialists, many "hand-picked due to their positions as stakeholders in the development of the Internet or they were reached through the leadership listservs of top technology organizations."

> Respondents were asked if people will be more tolerant in 2020 than they are today. Some 56% of the expert respondents disagreed with a scenario positing that social tolerance will advance significantly by then, saying communication networks also expand the potential for hate, bigotry, and terrorism. Some 32% predicted tolerance will grow. A number of the survey participants indicated that the divide between the tolerant and intolerant could possibly be deepened because of information-sharing tactics people use on the Internet.[3]

While it can be said that there is now a consensus that replacement of print by television has, on balance, had an overall negative impact on informed political participation, any overall verdict on the Internet and digitalized ICT will have to await the return of a jury which has barely begun to deliberate.

THE INTERNET AND MEDIA CONSUMPTION

It is not yet clear what effect the Internet has had on television consumption both in general and as a source of public affairs information. A survey of students at a large public American university tentatively concluded that "even when computer skills and Internet access become more widespread in the general population, use of the World Wide Web as a news source seems unlikely to diminish substantially use of traditional news media" (Althaus and Tewksbury 2000: 25). Thus, though the Internet adds an entire new set of simple-to-access media choices, these cannot be counted on to soon crowd out television.

Given the timing, the clearest effect of the Internet seems to have been on print. Looking at US data, we can see that the biggest single decade drop in reported regular newspaper reading was not in TV's heyday, but in the decade the Internet emerged, the1990s, when readership declined from approximately 50 to 40 percent (Wattenberg 2007:14). And it was only in the next decade that the Internet, especially in the replacement of paid newspaper classified ads by free interactive listings on Craig's list and the like, began to seriously undermine the newspapers' revenue stream.[4] As generating revenues becomes more difficult and uncertain, newspapers lay off journalists, and many shut down.[5] At one level, then, this completes the transformation from externally ordered, "objective" to internally ordered or "subjective" content initiated with the replacement of newspapers by remote controlled, multi-channel television.

But that is not the whole story. The Internet is also a print medium, one that has transformed the very nature of print journalism.[6] A number of observers take a very pessimistic view of where these trends will lead. For example, Keen (2007) is

representative of a view that the supposed "democratization" of the web has in fact been the opposite, that "the new democratic internet" that was supposed to replace the "dictatorship of expertise" in the old media with podcasts and streamed videos is in reality a "dictatorship of idiots." These unaccountable blogs and "news" sites, he contends, are often just fronts for public relations machines, or other forces with hidden agendas. Once dismantled, the institutions sustaining professional media can never be put back together. A politician refuses calls from representatives of the press and TV news at his peril. When they are gone, he asks, who will hold politicians to account? Or as another observer puts it, if newspapers go bust there will be nobody covering city hall, corruption will rise, and legislation more easily captured by vested interests.[7]

Nothing to worry about reply optimists like Colville, for whom "the Internet will bring a far greater openness to politics….

> The power of search will enforce consistency and depth in both policy and communication of policy. And the tone of debate will, at least in many cases, remain lively, anti-establishment and original. For the activist and the citizen, the internet will increasingly be used to hold politicians to account and to enable like-minded groups … to develop potent single-issue campaigns…. For policy development, the internet will bring greater scrutiny; and greater access to official government data could revolutionise the way policy-making works…. The most subtle, but perhaps most powerful, change, will be to the public's mindset. As we grow used to the instant availability of information online, we will no longer tolerate delay and obfuscation in getting similar information from government. The individual, and not the state, will be the master in the digital age (Colville 2008: i-ii)

Such polar opposite views can co-exist because the relevant facts are themselves contradictory or unavailable. For example, we do not know the effects of switching from print on paper to print on the screen. Some research suggests that such a shift may be more significant than it appears. Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) conducted an experiment in which subjects read either the print or online version of the New York Times for a week, finding online readers less likely to follow the cues of news editors and producers, which meant that they read fewer public affairs stories.

In fall 2007, the US National Endowment for the Arts linked low national reading test scores among young people with the decline in reading "for fun". While time spent on the Internet by children has exploded[8], there was no evidence of it enhancing reading achievement. Yet the results are ambiguous, since it does appear to have improved standardized reading test scores and school grades among low-income students (Jackson et al., 2006). The jury is still out on Bauerlein's (2008) claim that the Internet has engendered a brazen disregard of books and reading.

It is plausible that the addition of information received through the Internet to that disseminated through the press, TV and radio results in a decline in average quality of news coverage. For example, one study compared campaign coverage of candidates in the 2007 Australian election, in the "old" media and the various Internet sources, finding the latter more skewed toward the major candidates and parties. "Far from re-ordering old hierarchies, the Internet news may have made the election a less even contest"

(Goot 2008:99). On the other hand, the addition of Internet sources has undeniably resulted in an explosion in the quantity of accessible information. It is also plausible that while average quality of information may decline in the short term, heightened competition among so many competing sources will result in good quality winning out over time. But that presumes that good, professional news reporting, which was far from assured even when the news media were profitable, can find reliable markets in this environment. If information is free, what are the incentives for providing good, accurate information about public affairs?

Professional news sources face a growing situation of "anything goes," in which "consumers" of information will be flooded with content produced by amateurs. How will the consumers be able to distinguish those media that strive for "fair and accurate" reporting from those that consciously blur the line between news and opinion? Newspapers know that they can be sued for libel for printing false information; these is nothing like this to sanction, and discourage, doing the same on the Internet.

Increasingly freed of the "gatekeepers" in the professional media, what will enable ordinary Web users to distinguish the "facts" that the many conspiracy theorists purvey on the Web from real facts? And even if they can distinguish such reporting, can we expect a generation that has learned to expect to be able to download free its music and other media content to pay for professional news reporting? No one has yet come up with a formula under which third parties replace the income from lost readers, as well as advertisers, of printed newspapers.

The Quality of Information from the New Media

One Finnish study (Carlson 2008) showed that YouTube uploads (see below) intensify negative aspects as they get circulated and picked up by media. "Donald J. Leu, asked 48 students at the University of Connecticut, to look at a spoof Web site about a mythical species known as the 'Pacific Northwest tree octopus.' Nearly 90 percent of them, when asked, deemed the site a reliable source."[9] In a similar vein, a 2008 *Economist* article[10] described how easy it is to propagate hatred and lies through messages "amplified with blogs, online maps and text messaging;[11] as a campaign migrates from medium to medium, fresh layers of falsehood can be created.

> During the crisis that engulfed Kenya … it was often blog posts and mobile-phone messages that gave the signal for fresh attacks. Participants in recent anti-American marches in South Korea were mobilized by online petitions, forums and blogs, some of which promoted a crazy theory about Koreans having a genetic vulnerability to mad-cow disease…. In Russia, a nationalist blogger published names and contact details of students from the Caucasus attending Russia's top universities, attaching a video-clip of dark-skinned teenagers beating up ethnic Russians. Russian nationalist blogs reposted the story-- creating a nightmare for the students who were targeted.

The article concludes that a "a decade ago, a zealot seeking to prove some absurd proposition--such as the denial of the Nazi Holocaust, or the Ukrainian famine--might spend days of research in the library looking for obscure works of propaganda. Today, digital versions of these books, even those out of press for decades, are accessible in

dedicated online libraries." It clearly does not take much effort to spread falsehoods – as this news story during the 2008 US presidential election campaign illustrates:

> Sen. Barack Obama, born in Hawaii, is a Christian family man with a track record of public service. But [there is] another version of the Democratic candidate's background, one that is entirely false: Barack Obama, born in Africa, is a possibly gay Muslim racist who refuses to recite the Pledge of Allegiance…. Born on the Internet, the rumors now meander freely across the flatlands of northwest Ohio…. When people on College Street [in Findlay, Ohio] started hearing rumors about Obama -- who looked different from other politicians and often talked about change -- they easily believed the nasty stories about an outsider…."[12]

Fortunately, while it may not have convinced the residents of Findlay, the Obama campaign had the resources to bring the truth to a large enough number of Ohioans and Americans. But can we assume that resources can and will be marshaled to counter other such nasty rumors? In principle, yes. It is far easier to check facts in newspaper stories than in television reports, and even easier to verify ICT information. Digital media files persist over time in ways that analog files of the same types do not. Their being indexed, stored, and readily accessible facilitates assembling and comparing information. Hence the Internet provides easy means of testing what appear to be dubious assertions, making every consumer of information a potential fact-checker through Google, Wikipedia, etc.). Access to high speed Internet brings information costs toward the heretofore mythical zero built into the economists' model of the market. There can be no doubt that many, including professional researchers like the author of this book, benefit greatly from easy access to limitless information.[13] And the generation born into this medium naturally develops a level of savvy earlier generations cannot aspire to.

Still, the storing and ready accessibility of digitalized information is a two-edged sword – due especially to the unequal distribution of the pertinent skills. In seeking information from the Internet, users leave traces of data that sophisticated Web companies can follow, which enables them to target users with advertising tailored to their tastes and proclivities. And files – sometimes bogus files - may follow individuals through their lives, and reappear at inopportune moments. Young people, though increasingly sophisticated as to the Internet's potential uses and abuses, run the risk of their normal youthful experimentation becoming embedded into digital media.[14]

An example of the positive potential of this technology to facilitate informed political participation are *voting* advice applications (VAAs), which provide the voter with an objective individualized comparison between her or his own policy preferences and those of candidates or parties, by having both complete the same questionnaires. Among the most effective is the Swiss VAA, *smartvote.* According to its designers, although *smartvote* has broken through to young people, it is still predominantly used by those who need it least, better educated, higher income males (Ladner et al., 2008).[15]

We cannot thus count on the "average" citizen, for whom zero information cost potential is one matter, its realization another, to be sufficiently motivated to check assumptions against facts, even if the "user friendliness" and reliability of Internet information sources like Wikipedia are increasing. The Internet makes it easier than even television and

radio to emulate the prototypical Fox news watcher and talk-show listener, to select online sources that skew information so as to reinforce assumptions and prejudices. A study cited by Sunstein (2007) revealed that Web political bloggers rarely highlight opposing opinions: of 1,400 blogs surveyed, 91 percent of links were to like-minded sites.[16]

Can we expect the generation that has grown up online to do better? In a recent comparative study, a representative sample of 15 to 25 year olds from both the US and Canada, and a smaller sample of those 26 plus, answered the same questions testing their political knowledge, plus 55-odd questions designed to test out possible sources or consequences of political knowledge (Milner 2007). The first of these, the Civic and Political Health Telephone Survey, was undertaken by CIRCLE, and conducted in May 2006 with a representative sample of 1765 people[17] living in the continental United States, of whom 1209 were aged 15 to 25.[18] The Canadian survey was conducted by the author using similar methodology,[19] in September 2006 with 877 respondents 15 to 25 and 477 aged 26 plus. Just over one-third (451) of the interviews were conducted in French.

CIRCLE's earlier US survey (Keeter et al 2002) had posed three political knowledge questions. For this, second, round, five questions were added (chosen from among those proposed by the author). The resulting questionnaires allowed for 8 possible correct political knowledge answers for the American respondents, and 10 for the Canadians, 7 of which are common to both. It is this combined score out of 7 that serves as our main indicator of political knowledge.

The respondents were also asked the number of days per week they read newspapers, watched TV news and read news on the Internet. Table 1 displays the breakdown of those answering "none." It shows that in 2007 young people were using the Internet more (and TV and newspapers less) than their elders, but it was still a long way from becoming a universal source of political information.

TABLE 1: MEDIA USE

COUNTRY	AGEGROUP	Does not read news on the Internet	Does not watch the national news on television	Does not read newspapers
US	15 To 25	41,3	20.0	26.6
	26 +	49,2	13.5	21.5
Canada	15 To 25	44,6	17.0	20.7
	26 +	58,5	8.5	13.7

These numbers are evidently evolving. During the presidential primary season in 2008, forty percent of all adults stated that they looked for political information on the Internet, up from 31 percent in the 2004 primary season. Mirroring the trend seen in campaign

news consumption, by the end of the 2008 the Internet had displaced newspapers as the leading source after television for national and international news. More people (40 percent) say they rely mostly on the Internet for news than cited newspapers (35 percent). More significantly, perhaps, among young people, the Internet now rivals television for that purpose.[20] For good or bad, as means of being informed and communicating about politics and public affairs, the Internet is here to stay.

Hence we need to take seriously the finding that the media-related activity with the strongest correlation with political knowledge, irrespective of age, country or gender, turned out to be reading news on the Internet, with newspaper reading a strong second, and TV news watching quite a bit weaker, as illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VARIOUS FORMS OF MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE (mean of seven questions)

	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.*
	Beta		
(Constant)		2.817	.005
AGEGROUP	.089	5.092	.000
GENDER	.178	10.937	.000
COUNTRY	.117	7.115	.000
EDUCATION COMPLETED	.277	16.098	.000
On how many of the past 7 days did you			
- read a newspaper.	.103	5.984	.000
- watch the national news	.020	1.193	.233
- listen to the radio news	.001	.042	.966
- read news on Internet.	.186	11.062	.000
How many hours per day do you spend watching TV.	-.033	-2.002	.045

This corresponds to the conclusion of an analysis of American data on civic engagement and political participation that reading online news tends to lead to an increase in the level of interest in politics, political knowledge and political discussion (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal 2008).

Another question asked about Internet use per se. The questions are not identical since American respondents had 8 possible answers based on reported number of days the Internet was used in the last week, while Canadian respondents cast an either-or choice on at least occasional use. Significant relationships were found but these differed for the two countries. For the young Americans, Internet use was significantly related to

political knowledge, and intention to vote (among those not having had a chance to do so), while for the young Canadians it was significantly related to having voted in the last election (for those eligible), and, slightly more weakly, with political discussion at home.

When we our findings about North America against a study of Finland, a society with very high Internet usage and high civic literacy, we find a somewhat different situation: while highly motivated Finns do make use of the Internet to obtain political information, the overall relationship between such use and level of political knowledge is still quite weak (Grönlund 2007). Still, in the context the inevitable decline in newspaper reading, the potential of the Internet as a source of political information for young people cannot be left unexplored and unexploited.

A study using results of the Maxwell poll found that moderate and occasional users of the Internet are more likely than non-users to participate politically, but that – as with television - the effect apparently reverses for frequent users, who are generally less likely be involved in outside activities (Reeher 2006). This suggests a parallel to Prior's above-noted finding of the effects of the widened choice provided by Cable TV: Increased Internet access may widen the gap in informed political participation between people looking for news and those looking for other things. Suggestive in this regard is a study by Kidd and Phillips (2007) which surveyed 664 18 to 25 year-olds on different forms of internet-based communications. They found that the Internet as an information source can be clearly a significant and positive influence on youth political engagement, but only when it takes an appropriate form. In fact, the only form that positively and significantly influenced youth participation were irregular e-mails with information about important issues. This insight helps explain an unexpected finding in an experiment by Sherr (2005), in which the young participants learned less from the more youthful and dynamic Web sites that they preferred than from the standard sites from which they retained more.[21]

Such findings suggest that daunting obstacles remain to the Internet becoming a source of political information for as wide a segment of the population as were newspapers and television in their heydays. As access to the high-speed Internet approaches levels of access to multi-channel television, the digital divide is increasingly based of skills rather than access. More than television news watching, effectively using the Internet as a source of public affairs information, requires a certain level of skill. As they become increasingly dependent on digital information and tools, citizens are expected to be capable of exercising greater independent informed judgment to make use of the information and tools - the skills for which are unequally distributed. This unequal distribution, as in other domains, reflects class differences. But what of the effects of age? Is the gap smaller for the Internet generation? To begin to answer this we turn from the information side to the other side of ICT, the effects of which are more directly related to political participation and mobilization. This second dimension, that of communications, enables Internet users to be producers as well as consumers of content.

A Web of Netizens?

According to a recent study (Jenkins 2006), more than half of all teenagers have created media content in some form, and roughly one-third of those who use the

Internet have shared content they produced. But the digital divide remains. A study by Hargittai and Walejko (2008) explored the extent to which young adults create and share video, music, writing and artistic photography online. They found that despite the new opportunities, it is largely confined to a relatively small minority of young adults with well-educated parents.

One popular characterization of this development is of the Internet as a participatory Web, having moved into a new phase called "Web 2.0.," a "user-driven platform" providing "an architecture of participation: the Web shifts from a publishing medium to a platform for social participation and interaction based around social networking activities (Carlson 2008). As such, it raises the practical possibility on the attainment of what we might term "netizenship", effective citizenship through interactive communication and the distribution and sharing of political content.[22]

As noted, the fundamental obstacle to Web 2.0 living up to its potential is no longer universal access per se. Already in 2004, three out of four Americans under the age of 18 had access to a computer, which, on average, they used 30 minutes every day.[23] Table 3 presents a useful breakdown for Sweden, which is at or close to the top in Internet use. A similar portrait could be drawn of all advanced countries tomorrow if not today.

TABLE 3: SWEDISH INTERNET USE (2007)

Have no computer	1 100 000
Have computer, not Internet	440 000
Have Internet access but don't use it	585 000
Seldom use Internet	200 000
Use Internet once or a few times weekly	1 170 000
Use Internet daily	3 360 000
Use Internet several times daily	440 000

Source: The World Internet Institute: Sweden (www.wii.se).

In a comparative US-Canada survey (Milner 2007), only 8 percent of the young American respondents and 10 percent of the young Canadians reported never using the Internet. As the cost of high-speed access declines, the physical capacity to retrieve and exchange digital content as text, sounds, still and moving pictures, and various types of graphics - anytime, anywhere and with anyone - will become standard. But standard only for those with the requisite skills. Beyond emails and SMS messaging, netizenship entails skills to manoeuvre effectively through blogs, podcasts, social networking services, digital petitions, and wikis (online documents written and edited by volunteers). Informed choices must be made as to membership in online communities, message boards, etc. And skills must be upgraded to keep up with new forms of expression.

Closing this skill-based digital divide will entail attaining an ICT form of literacy akin to – and comprising - print literacy. Yet, it bears remembering that universal print literacy has yet to be attained in North America, with over 20 percent of adults below minimal levels of functional literacy. This is a situation quite different from the high-civic literacy countries of Northern Europe where state agencies are directly involved in promoting adult literacy and where we can see parallel efforts to promote literacy and new media access (see Milner 2002). In North America such efforts are largely in the hands of private foundations, some of which have poured large sums of money into new initiatives to teach young people the skills to express themselves through digital media links. In a sense, the outcome of the debate between pessimists and optimists over the capacity of the new ICT media to foster a generation of netizens hinges on the potential effectiveness of these initiatives to close the new digital divide. The evidence is contradictory, and opinions vary.

Optimists like Krueger (2002) argue that, given equalized access, the Internet shows genuine potential to bring individuals into the political process. But more pessimistic observers interpret the data to show that online activities reinforce the established patterns of inequality between the participants and dropouts (see Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2005). A useful Spanish survey investigated this phenomenon. A 2007 survey (Anduiza et al 2009) of 3700 respondents used three political knowledge items and found the expected strong, positive and linear relationship between level of education and of political interest with political knowledge, with the highly educated and highly interested in politics averaging twice the correct answers of the least educated and interested, with the political knowledge gap between the well educated and the poorly educated larger for Internet users than for non-Internet users.

While this finding supports the pessimistic interpretation, they also tested an alternative, positive, interpretation, namely the possibility that the Internet could also have an effect comparable to the pre-cable days of television when entertainment TV watchers stayed on the same channel and thus "accidentally" watched the news. Was there a similar accidental effect due, say, to use of email servers and other web-pages that contain news portals, or to uninvited receipt of electronic correspondence with political content? While they could find no direct evidence of this, they did find that, controlling for education, Internet use raised political knowledge more among the politically uninterested than the politically interested. Somehow, it appears, Internet use compensates for low interest in politics.

Turning to young people, Vromen (2008) shows that, similarly, Internet use facilitates participation by already politically engaged Australian 18 to 34 year olds, but in so doing exacerbates the digital divide due to geography, education level, income level and occupational classification. When asked (in the 2000 Canadian Election Study) if they ever used the Internet to inform themselves about politics, by far the most important discriminating factor was education, with income second (Gidengil et al, 2004: 33). Moreover, studies in the United States confirm that not only is socioeconomic class an important determinant of quantity and quality of Internet use, but that, as in other aspects of informed political participation, race matters - even when controlling for education and Income (Mossberger, Tolbert, Stansbury 2003.)

One study shows that Britain, where Internet use is comparatively low, is a long way from attaining desired levels of netizenship. Using evidence from the 2005 Oxford Internet Survey, Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) found that Internet experience and proficiency had a significant impact on whether one becomes politically engaged online, but that online political participation reinforced and in some cases exacerbated existing social inequalities in offline political participation. A parallel finding emerges from a case study (Kavanaugh et al 2008) of local political participation recently conducted in Virginia in a community with a mature computer network (the Blacksburg Electronic Village).

> In addition to politically active citizens, some politically passive citizens report that web logs (blogs) have fostered greater online exchange with other citizens through ad hoc political talk and knowledge sharing. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that the Internet (including blogs) helps bring these individuals into community or political decision-making spheres. They conclude that although "these communication technologies add voices from engaged segments of the population, voices from passive-apathetic and apathetic groups largely remain silent….If we are to broaden enfranchisement, it seems powerful social and technological interventions remain needed."

At this point, then, the online computer is no more a technological fix to the problem of political dropouts, than it is to school dropouts.[24] The current state of affairs is well captured in the conclusion of an investigation into ICT in Canada.

> [Rather than being] involved in a fundamental redistribution of power in Canada; considerably more was found to suggest that ICTs both reflect and reinforce the existing inequalities. The digital divide - whether conceived narrowly in terms of connectivity, or more broadly in terms of the ability and capacity to use ICTs in ways that enhance the autonomy of disadvantaged citizens - is an enduring reality in Canada's corner of cyber-space.… [There is] little reason to believe that ICTs are involved in a rebirth of the culture of democratic citizenship in Canada, or that the relationship between ICTs and the prospect of genuinely democratic public sphere in Canada is anything more than ambiguous, at best (Barney: 2005: 176-7).

Mobilizing Young People Politically on then Internet

If netizenship as a generalized state of affairs has yet to be attained, netizen networks have mushroomed on the Internet, which opens an extraordinary new space for political interaction and organization. In the above cited article, Vromen describes how information sharing and organizing on the Internet facilitates young Australians' involvement in activist and community groups. There is a growing number of such non-partisan resources, e.g. "TakingITGlobal" (see Raynes-Goldie and Walker 2007), oriented to enhancing youth participation. Offering a variety of interactive resources, such sites often seek not only to encourage young people's interest, but also to convey young people's views and concerns to policy makers and enhance two-way communication between them (Xenos, Bennett and Loader 2007). Indymedia, for example, had its origins in 1999 in the lead-up to the protests against the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle. It grew to become a global network of over 135 news

websites where volunteer contributors post news with local, regional, and international content (Chadwick, 2006).

Some such sites are for social networking: for example, Essembly.com, where youth can find others with similar political interests, vote on posted 'resolutions', and engage in online discussion of political issues. Yet despite the multiplicity of such more targeted sites, they are dwarfed as forums for political organizing by the social network, Facebook. Originally, political organizing on Facebook and the like was limited to unconventional forms of involvement. However, as we shall see, all its success[25] has attracted the attention of mainstream political parties, which are increasing efforts to use these networks for recruitment purposes (Schifferes, S., S. Ward, and W. Lusoli 2007).

One specific technique used by politically-oriented organizations is online petitioning. One article analyzed online petitions hosted on the Petitions Online website focusing on those that address entertainment and the media, one of eight categories in which the host site classifies the petitions. The 14,395 petitions with over 10 signatures in the month of November 2006 in this category roughly equalled the total of the other 7 categories (environment, technology and business, religion, and international, national, state, and local politics and government. A study by Earl and Schussman (2007) of a large sample of those addressing entertainment and the media (with a median of 143 participants), revealed that these typically focus on products and industries associated with youth culture, and often represent consumer contestation of decisions about the scheduling (or cancelling) of entertainment programs or events . Of course, the fact that ICT technology makes petitioning easy no doubt makes the targets of online petitions sceptical as to the commitment of the signers.[26] Yet some are clearly effective in getting results when addressing matters of concern to young people.

But to what extent are these political? In what ways do protests in gaming communities, music file sharing, or fan petitioning of music companies constitute political behaviours?" The answer, Earl and Schussman suggest, lies in evidence that may show that the communication skills and actions in these areas of online life are being transferred to more familiar political realms such as voting and public protest. Calenda and Mosca (2007) argue that this is only natural since the Internet is perceived by young people as the appropriate medium for discussing political matters, via new and more creative forms of communication and participation. Yet the evidence is spotty. In carrying out "sophisticated electronic content analysis," Wilhelm (1999: 175) found that "political forums do not provide virtual sounding boards for signaling and thematising issues to be processed by the political system."

In sum, while Internet idealists (e.g. Trippi 2004) envisage a universal electronic public sphere for debate and deliberation, this aspiration is contested by other scholars as, at best, "premature [since] the web does not lead to objectively measurable changes in political involvement or information" (Scheufele and Nisbet 2002:68; see also Miller 2000). Though younger citizens seem to increasingly expect e-engagement possibilities and are encouraged to make use of e-services from government, a survey of the actual initiatives suggests that actual exercise of these possibilities is limited to those already interested (see Gibson and Ward, 2008).

The question thus remains. To what extent do Internet-based social networking sites such as Facebook, in transcending the social limits of the geographic community and bypassing traditional information gatekeepers and authorities, also provide forums for communicating, organizing and socializing for young people without face-to-face contact? So far, the hopes of the creators of youth-oriented civic and political sites that the Internet would reengage the young in the public sphere, cross-national research suggests, have not been realized (Livingstone and Dahlgren 2007). Similarly, Hindman (2009), tracking nearly three million Web sites, finds that the Internet in fact empowers a small set of mainly familiar elites, and that online organizing is dominated by a few powerful interest groups, concluding that the Internet has neither diminished the audience share of corporate media nor given greater voice to ordinary citizens. Faced with such facts, even the optimists insist on the necessity of profound educational and political change in order to fulfill the potential of ICTs (Ferguson 2007).

The Internet and Political Campaigns: The Obama Effect

Overall, then, the Internet has not yet been found to live up to its potential as an instrument of youth political involvement, or creating a generation of netizens. But the literature cited here predates the Obama campaign, which has been heralded as ushering in a new era in online (and offline) youth civic engagement and two-way communication between citizens and political decision makers. An important step in this direction came when in 2006 YouTube created YouChoose, a section of the site devoted to showing videos from candidates. Seven of the 16 presidential aspirants in 2008 announced their candidacies on YouTube.

> As the campaign season wore on, many candidates … uploaded ads and permitted freewheeling — sometimes ferocious — discussion of them…. Candidates virtually forfeited control over the context of their videos and allowed them to be embedded, critiqued, recut and satirized.... Some candidates also discovered, to their surprise, that they could upload vanity videos (or ones that seemed fairly parody-proof) and supporters would circulate them on social networks, amateurs would use them to make ads and they would get influential, focused advertising for nothing. Early on, the musician will.i.am used film of an Obama speech to make his "Yes We Can" music video. That video, in multiple versions, has become the most-watched political entry on the site, having been seen around 15 million times. (The campaign's upload of the actual "Yes We Can" speech has fewer than two million views.) [27]

The Obama campaign perfected techniques developed by various politically-motivated organizations including, among those left of center, MoveOn, the Huffington Post, Daily Kos, and Democratic Underground. Only the last, however, takes a grass-roots approach perfected on the other side of the spectrum, by the right-leaning Web site, Free Republic. The site's discussion lists are connected by participants to "a plethora of state message boards organizing real-time, boots-on-the-ground political action [in the form of] innovative Internet architecture to build a sort of Wikipedia of citizenship, a do-

it-yourself kit for spreading messages and connecting them with local, face-to-face activism."

> But 2008 brought one major exception to the general pattern. Over the last two years, the Obama campaign built another "Wikipedia" of citizenship. It used its Web site to disseminate tools for grass-roots organizing and made its campaign infrastructure infinitely expandable as groups replicated over and over, learning from and copying one another. The campaign infrastructure became, to a significant degree, self-organizing. [28]

Obama was able to come from nowhere to vanquish the seemingly invincible Clinton organization and then win the presidency. While his oratorical skills are not to be denied, the electronic mobilization of support making use of an email list of some 13,000,000 played a key role.[29] In the primaries, Obama racked up huge scores in college towns, especially in states that require greater efforts at participation by choosing delegates through caucuses - a result in good part of the use of sophisticated electronic mobilization techniques to capitalize on Obama's attractiveness.

It remains to be seen if this can be replicated: no such effect was found in the 2006 mid-term US election.[30] It could be that there is something unique in the Obama 2008 phenomenon, which raises a more prosaic question: for how many was Obama in effect the electronic celebrity of the moment? A political figure can become "hot" under extraordinary circumstances; but political figures as a rule play on an uneven electronic playing field. Their world is less engaging than competing worlds that can be entered at the push of a button or via a computer mouse. In the real political world one is but a mere citizen; in a video game, one is a player; on Facebook, a bright star in a constellation. Many young people apparently happily shared such space with Obama – but for how long?

Aware of the challenge, the Obama organization moved immediately to try to convert the campaign's success with social networking technologies into a tool for good governance: "to remake the tools of factional organization as instruments of broad, cross-partisan and respectful public engagement."[31] The challenge will be immense in the context of inevitable disappointments of office, especially given the appalling economic circumstances.[32]

Conclusion

The critical question is how many of those electronically touched by the Obama phenomenon gained real and lasting political knowledge and, in the process, developed habits of attentiveness to public affairs they would otherwise not have developed? If that number is large, then we are seeing the harbinger of a more informed and attentive public, and a firmer basis of civic engagement. But we need to be wary. The Obama phenomenon is rare – if not unique. The new ICT world has brought many changes, but the test facing our democracies remains: will the emerging generations be able to participate politically as informed citizens? Those lacking the skills to make sense of what is happening in the political world cannot be counted on to participate meaningfully. The new technologies do not change this. On the one side they provide new ways of paying attention and participating; on the other hand they require not only access to those networks, but the skill to use them effectively. The digital technologies

can boost civic literacy, the proportion of citizens with the knowledge and skills to be effective citizens, but they can also exacerbate class-based gaps in such knowledge and skills. We do not yet know enough to assert which is the stronger; but we do know enough to assert that we have no choice in the matter.

REFERENCES

Althaus, S.L., and D. Tewksbury. 2002. "Agenda Setting and the "New" News: Patterns of Issue Importance Among Readers of the Paper and Online Versions of the New York Times." *Communication Research* 29 (2): 180-207.

Althaus, S.L., and D. Tewksbury. 2000. "Patterns of Internet and Traditional News Media Use in a Networked Community." *Political Communication* 17 (1): 21-45.

Anduiza, Eva, Aina Gallego and Laia Jorba 2009. "The Political Knowledge Gap in the New Media Environment: Evidence from Spain" Presented at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops. Lisbon April 2009.

Barney, Derek. 2005. *Communication Technology.* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Bauerlin, Mark. 2008. *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.

Baumgartner, Jody C., and Jonathan S. Morris. 2008. "MyFaceTube Politics: Assessing the Impact of Social Networking Websites on the Political Attitudes and Knowledge of Young Adults During the Early 2008 Presidential Primary Season." Paper presented at the annual meeting of APSA, Boston, Massachusetts.

Bellamy, Robert V., and James R. Walker. 1996. *Television and the Remote Control: Grazing on a Vast Wasteland.* New York: Guilford.

Calenda, Daviede, and Lorenzo Mosca. 2007. "Logged on and engaged?: the experience of Italian young people." In *Young Citizens in the Digital Age Political Engagement, Young People and New Media*, ed. Brian D. Loader. Abington: Routledge.

Cantijoch, Marta, and Josep San Martin. 2008. "Exposure to Political Information in New and Old Media: Which Impact on Political Participation?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of APSA, Boston, Massachusetts.

Carlson, T. 2008. "Riding the Web 2.0 Wave Candidates on Youtune in the Finnish 2007 Election." Unpublished paper Abo Academy. Turku, Finland.

Chadwick, A. 2006. *Internet Politics: States, Citizens and New Communication Technologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Colville, Robert. 2008. *Politics, Policy and the Internet*. London: Centre for Policy Studies.

Di Gennaro, Corinna, and William Dutton. 2006. "The Internet and the Public: Online and Offline Political Participation in the United Kingdom." *Parliamentary Affairs* 59 (2): 299-313.

Earl, Jennifer and Alan Schussman. 2007. "Contesting Cultural Control: Youth Culture and Online Petitioning." In <u>Civic Engagement</u>, ed. Lance Bennett. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Ferguson, Ross. 2007. "P2P Politics: Young People and Policy Deliberation Online." In *Young Citizens in the Digital Age Political Engagement, Young People and New Media*, ed. Brian D. Loader. Abington: Routledge.

Fuchs, Thomas, and Ludger Woessmann. 2004. "Computers and Student Learning: Bivariate and Multivariate Evidence on the Availability and Use of Computers at Home and at School." *CESifo Working Paper Series* 1321.

Gibson, R.K., W. Lusoli, and S. Ward. 2005. "Online Participation in the UK: Testing a "Contextualised" Model of Internet Effects." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 7: 561-583.

Gibson, Rachel and Stephen Ward. 2008. "E-Politics - the Australian experience." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 43 (1).

Gidengil, Elisabeth, André Blais, Neil Nevitte, and Richard Nadeau. 2004. *Citizens.* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Goot, Murray. 2008. "Is the News on the Internet Different? Leaders, Frontbenchers and Other Candidates in the 2007 Australian Election?" *Australian Journal of Political Science* 43 (1): 99-110.

Grönlund, Kimmo. 2007. "Knowing and Not Knowing. The Internet and Political Information." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (3): 397-418.

Hargittai, Eszter, and Gina Walejko. 2008. "The Participation Divide: Content Creation and Sharing in the Digital Age." *Information, Communication & Society* 11 (2): 239-256.

Hindman, Matthew. 2009. *The Myth of Digital Democracy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Iyengar, Shanto, and Simon Jackman. 2004. "Technology and Politics: Incentives for Youth Participation." *CIRCLE* 24 (December).

Jackson, L.A., A. von Eye, F.A. Biocca, G. Barbatsis, Y. Zhao, and H.E. Fitzgerald. 2006. "Does Home Internet Use Influence the Academic Performance of Low-Income Children?" *Developmental Psychology* 24: 413-437.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." Occasional Paper, The MacArthur Foundation.

Keen, Andrew. 2007. *The Cult of the Amateur*. New York: Random House.

Kavanaugh, Andrea, B. Joon Kim, Manuel A. Prez-Quiones, Joseph Schmitz, and Philip Isenhour. 2008. "Net Gains in Political Participation: Secondary effects of Internet on community." *Information, Communication & Society* 11 (7): 933-963.

Keeter, Scott, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins. 2002. "The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait." College Park, Maryland: *CIRCLE*.

Kidd, Quentin, and Erin Phillips. 2007. "Does the Internet Matter? Examining the Effects of the Internet on Young Adult's Political Participation." Presented at the annual meeting of APSA, Chicago, Illinois.

Krueger, Brian S. 2002. "Assessing the Potential of Internet Political Participation in the United States: A Resource Approach." *American Politics Research* 30 (5): 476-498.

Ladner, Andreas, and Giorgio Nagig. 2008. "E-tools for Civic Education: the Swiss Experience in Comparative Context." Presented at the Civic Education and Political Participation workshop, Université de Montréal, Montréal,Québec.

Livingstone, S., and P. Dahlgren. 2007. "Interactivity and Participation on the Internet: Young People's Response to the Civic Sphere." In *Young citizens and new media*, ed. S. Livingstone and P. Dahlgren. London: Routledge.

Manjoo, Farhad. 2008. *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.

Marschall, Stefan, and Christian K. Schmidt. 2008. "Preaching to the Converted or Making a Difference? Mobilizing Effects of an Internet Application at the German General Election 2005." In *Non-Party Actors in Electoral Politics*, ed. David M. Farrell and Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Milner, Henry. 2007. *Political Knowledge and Political Participation among Young Canadians and Americans*. Montréal: IRPP.

Milner, Henry. 2002. *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work.* Hanover: University Press of New England.

Morris, Jonathan S., and Richard Forgette. "News Grazers,Television News, Political Knowledge, and Engagement." *Press/Politics* 12 (1): 91-107.

Mossberger, Karen, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Ramona S. McNeal. *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Raynes-Goldie, Kate, and Luke Walker. 2008. "Taking IT Global: Online Community to Create Real World Change, A Case Study." In L. Bennett (Ed.), Civic Engagement: The MacArthur Series on Digital Media and Learning. MIT Press. 2007.

Reeher, Grant. 2006. "Log On, Tune Off? The Complex Relationship Between Internet Use and Political Activism." Papers and commentaries based on the 2005 *The Maxwell Poll on Civic Engagement and Inequality.* February 28, 2006 Http://www.personaldemocracy.com.

Robinson, Michael J. 1974. "The Impact of the Televised Watergate Hearings." *Journal of Communication* 24 (2): 17-30.

Ruusuvirta, Outi and Martin Rosema 2008. "Do web-based voting advice applications influence the direction and quality of vote decisions?" Presented at Elections, Public Opinion and Parties 2008 Annual Conference, Manchester 12th - 14th September, 2008.

Scheufele, D.A., and M.C. Nisbet. 2002. "Being a Citizen On-line: New Opportunities and Dead Ends." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 7 (3): 53-73.

Schifferes, Ward, and Wainer Lusoli. 2007. *What's The Story…? Online News Consumption in the 2005 UK Election.* Unpublished manuscript, ESRI. Salford University. United Kingdom.

Sherr, Susan. 2005. "News for a New Generation: Can it Be Fun and Functional?" *CIRCLE* 29.

Sunstein, Cass R. 2007. *Republic.com 2.0.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Trippi, J. 2004. *The Revolution Will not be Televised: Democracy, the Internet, and the Overthrow of Everything.* New York: Regan Books.

Vromen, Ariadne. 2008. "Building Virtual Spaces: Young People, Participation and the Internet." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 43 (1): 79-97.

Wattenberg, Martin. 2007. Is Voting for Young People? *New York: Longman.*

Wilhelm, A. 1999. "Virtual Sounding Boards: How Deliberative is Online Political Discussion?" In *Digital democracy : discourse and decision making in the Information Age*, ed. Barry N. Hague and Brian D. Loader. London and New York: Routledge.

Xenos, M.A., and W.L. Bennett. 2007. "Young Voters and the Web of Politics: The Promise and Problems of Youth-Oriented Political Content on the Web." In *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People, and New Media*, ed. Brian Loader. London: Routledge.

---

[1] This paper is based on Chapter 3 of *Political Dropouts or Netizens: Democracy and the Internet Generation*, to be published by the University Press of New England in fall 2009.

[2] Morris and Forgette cite: among others, Krugman and Hartley 1970; Prior 2005; Robinson 1974.

[3] Pew foundation: The future of the Internet III: Internet ill online survey (p.7). http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/The-Future-of-the-Internet-III.aspx

[4] In 2005 US newspaper advertising reached its peak.... Online ads produced $2 billion and $11 billion came from 54 million daily readers. "Since then, it has been downhill…. Ad revenues declined to $45.4 billion in 2007, followed by quarter-by-quarter falls of 12 percent to 20 percent during the catastrophes of 2008…. The most immediate threat from the Internet is classified ads … vulnerable to complete cannibalization by the Internet…. Losing up to 30 percent of the revenues in a leveraged model is not good, but the real fear is that the rest of the advertisers will also leave." James V. Delong, "Preparing the Obituary" *The American, A Magazine of Ideas,* Online at American.com. March 3 2009.

[5] See John Nichols *&* Robert W. McChesney*, "*The Death and Life of Great American Newspapers."*The Nation*, April 6, 2009.

[6] For example, old-style reporters are giving way to the "mojos," mobile journalists who have smart phones, laptops, digital audio recorders and cameras, but no office and no landline telephone. They send their material electronically, directly to their newspaper's website, material which may also find its way into print in the newspaper's hard copy - if there still is one**.** The text can be readily complemented by pictures, graphics, and videos, with sound added. The original source of that content can be a report prepared by a New York Times or BBC News reporter. But it can be many other things: blogs, podcasts, etc., produced under a very different cost structure.

[7] Porter rejects the idea that the Internet and Cable TV will fill the gap: "Cash-strapped TV stations depend on newspapers for much of their local news coverage. Cable news is increasingly commentary. And rather than a citizen reporter, the Internet has given us the citizen pundit, who comments on: newspaper articles. Reporting the news in far-flung countries, spending weeks on investigations of uncertain payoff, fighting for freedom of information in court — is expensive. Virtually the only entities still doing it on the necessary scale are newspapers. Letting them go on the expectation that the Internet will enable a better-informed citizenry seems like a risky bet" ("Newspapers, It matters." New York Times. February 12, 2008: A18).

[8] In a study of 2,032 representative 8 to 18-year-olds, the Kaiser Family Foundation found that nearly half used the Internet on a typical day in 2004, up from just under a quarter in 1999. The average time these children spent online on a typical day rose to one hour and 41 minutes in 2004, from 46 minutes in 1999. See Motoko Rich, "Literacy Debate: Online, R U Really Reading?" New York Times July 27, 2008.

[9] The site is at http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus. Motoko Rich, "Literacy Debate: Online, R U Really Reading?" New York Times July 27, 2008.

[10] "The Brave New World of E-hatred: Social Networks and Video-sharing Sites don't always Bring People Closer Together." *The Economist*, July 24th 2008.

[11] In the US, "more than 75 billion text messages are sent a month, and the most avid texters are 13 to 17, say researchers. Teens with cell phones average 2,272 text messages a month, compared with 203 calls, according to the Nielsen Co". (Donna St. George "6,473 Texts a Month, But at What Cost? Constant Cell phone Messaging Keeps Kids Connected, Parents Concerned" *Washington Post*, February 22, 2009; Page A01.

[12] "In Flag City USA, False Obama Rumors Are Flying" Eli Saslow, *Washington Post*, June 30, 2008: A01. In a later New York Times column (Sept. 21, 2008) , Nicholas Kristof reported that "A Pew Research Center survey released a few days ago found that only half of Americans correctly know that Mr. Obama is a Christian. Meanwhile, 13 percent of registered voters say that he is a Muslim, compared with 12 percent in June and 10 percent in March. More ominously, a rising share — now 16 percent — say they aren't sure about his religion because they've heard 'different things' about it."

[13] A positive example of real potential benefits of this technology is the case of John Philip Neufeld, a 21-year-old music student at Concordia University in Montreal, who sometimes acts as moderator on a site where people can upload computer-generated animation. When surfing the web just before dawn on March 17 2009. "He stumbled on a fresh posting that made him nervous. 'It said: 'Today at 11:30, I am going to blow up my school. Those bastards are going to pay,' [along with] a photograph of himself holding a gasoline canister.… Having spotted a link on the posting to a news site in England's Norfolk region, Mr. Neufeld tracked down the phone number for police in the area…. Mr. Neufeld said police, who had received another warning from a British web surfer, took the tip seriously…. Police were waiting at Attleborough High School when a 16-year-old boy arrived around 11:30 a.m. armed with a knife, matches and a canister of what appeared to be flammable liquid." ("Montreal student helps avert British school attack" Peggy Curran, Canwest News Service Published: Friday, March 20, 2009.

[14] See Louise Story, "To aim ads, Web is Keeping Closer Eye on you," New York Times, March 10, 2008. Another disturbing element emerges from a Canadian survey of 308 Facebook users found the more time they spent on the site, the more suspicious they became of their partners. The researchers argue that the social-networking site provides a vast catalogue of potentially painful artefacts…. The site gives people unprecedented access to the "off hours" of their significant others. 'You get a news feed telling you who posted on your partner's wall, who said what, what friends have been added." Even those who refrain from spying on their partners are not immune. "Friends end up providing you with information that 10, 15 years ago you would never have found out about.... And suddenly you're exposed to everybody else's misattribution of what's going on in the pictures and comments" (Zosia Bielski "Facebook is ... breeding spying, jealous lovers" Globe and Mail, February 12, 2009). Another study, reported in Montreal's La Presse on April 21 2009, found that users of Facebook studied less than half as many hours as non Facebook users.

[15] Dutch experience, (see Ruusuvirta, and Rosema 2008) with the "Stemwijzer," introduced during the 1998 election campaign to help undecided voters is also interesting, as is that of the German VAA, Wahlomat, developed in coordination with the BPB, the federal agency responsible for civic education in Germany (Marschall and Schmidt, 2008). .

[16] In an interview with Salon.com, Sunstein expresses the fear that "when it comes to the Internet, we demand the right to reinforce our own beliefs without embracing the responsibility to challenge them." He found a danger to democratic discourse in "all the excitement about personalization and customization, hearing people saying "this is unbelievably great that we can just include what we like and exclude what we dislike," when his research into jury behavior was finding "that like-minded jurors, when they talk to one another, tend to get more extreme." (http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/11/07/sunstein). In a similar analysis, Manjoo (2008) describes Americans organizing themselves into "echo chambers." The earliest thinker along these lines was MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte, who coined the term "the Daily Me" to describe a virtual daily newspaper customized for an individual's tastes.

[17] The number surveyed was actually higher but I do not include the data from the survey of over-samples of African-Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans aged 15 to 25 carried on via the web. No such effort was undertaken in Canada, both because there is no comparable population, and also because there is reason to suspect that Internet survey respondents act differently. Responses are drawn from a list of persons who have expressed initial interest in participating in surveys, and the methodology used to create Internet samples in Canada is more problematic than that used by Knowledge Networks which carried out the American Internet survey.

[18] The sample was drawn using standard *list-assisted random digit dialing* (RDD) methodology. The telephone interviewing over-sampled 15-to-25-year-olds by setting a maximum quota for respondents 26 and older. After that quota was filled, all remaining interviews were conducted with 15 to 25 year-olds. Interviews were conducted with 15 year-olds only after getting parental consent.

[19] The US survey, which had greater financial resources available made a greater effort to track down difficult to reach potential respondents. In the end, the response rate for 15 to25 year olds was 24.7 percent; while that in Canada it was only 9.7 percent. It is clearly becoming extremely difficult to carry on telephone surveys, especially of young people. For Canada especially, we can see that in the fact that reported voting was much higher than that found by elections Canada - another reason I give little weight to reported voting. In many instances low response rates make conclusions dubious, since those not responding are likely to differ from those responding on the attitudes being surveyed. (a glaring example is a survey headlined in Montreal`s *La Presse* (4 July, 2007) stating that 86% of young Quebeckers were happy). As far as political knowledge is concerned, if the low response rate skewed the outcome, it most likely did so in the direction of higher levels of political knowledge. Hence there is no reason to see it affecting the basic findings - except that the differential in response rate could account in part for the lower level of knowledge of the Americans.

[20] See The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Oct. 31, 2008, and December 28, 2008. http://people-press.org/report/479/internet-overtakes-newspapers-as-news-source.

[21] Sherr suggests that the latter had greater credibility, which is a significant factor in determining the degree to which subjects retain the information provided. Another experiment showed that providing young people with a CD with useful political information gave them a meaningful opportunity to engage in the world of politics (Iyengar and Jackman 2004).

[22] The term netizen was coined in 1992 by computer specialist Michael Hauben, to refer to an Internet user with a sense of civic responsibility to the online community corresponding to a citizen's duty to his country. The expression *Netizenship* refers to the extension of participatory citizenship into the virtual space of the internet.

[23] "In the words of a 17 year-old respondent in a recent Pew Internet and American Life survey, 'I multi-task every single second I am online. At this very moment I am watching TV, checking my email every two minutes, reading a newsgroup about who shot JFK, burning some music to a CD, and writing this message' " (Iyengar and Jackman 2004: 3).

[24] Using the international student-level PISA database, Fuchs and Woessmann (2004) show that the positive correlation between student achievement and the availability of computers both at home and at schools becomes negative for home computers, and insignificant for school computers, once they control for family background and school characteristics.

[25] According to Advertising Age, 90 per cent of Canadian undergraduate students report using Facebook daily (Zosia Bielski, *Globe and Mail*, February 12, 2009; *op. cit.*).

[26] Here is a story that suggests that people put very little weight on their online commitments.

"One day this past summer, I logged on to Facebook and realized that I was very close to having 700 online 'friends.' … So I decided to have a Facebook party. I used Facebook to create an 'event' and invite my digital chums…. Facebook gives people the option of RSVP'ing in three categories — 'attending,' 'maybe attending' and 'not attending.' …. Fifteen people said they were attending, and 60 said maybe;…. one person showed up. I would learn, when I asked some people who didn't show up the next day, that 'definitely attending' on Facebook means 'maybe' and 'maybe attending' means 'likely not'" (Hal Niedzviecki "Facebook in a Crowd," New York Times, October 26, 2008).

[27] Heffernan, Virginia, "The Medium: Clicking and Choosing", *New York Times Magazine,* November 16, 2008.

[28] Allen, Danielle, "Citizenship 2.0" Washington Post, November 25, 2008; A15.

[29] At the end of February 2008, when his campaign really took off, Obama had 300,000 "friends" on Facebook (to Hillary Clinton's 85,000). On both MySpace and Youtube there were almost three times as many sites for Obama as Clinton. Among the Youtube election-related clips, the five most popular Clinton ones were seen by an average of 383,000 compared to 847,000 for Obama's top 5. And Obama's campaign raised many millions of dollars in small donations via these sites (*La Presse*, "L'Internet favorise Obama, Karine Prémont." February 22: A17).

[30] Baumgartner and Morris 2008. Similary, Cantioch, Jorba and San Martin (2008) find that among Spanish respondents unlike the "old media", exposure to political content on the Internet does not affect turnout.

[31] Allen, op.cit.

[32] On the weekend of March 21, 2009, the first major test of the network took place, sending people door-to-door to sell Obama's budget.