

Title: Political Participation and Web 2.0

Author: Allison Orr

University of New South Wales, School of Social Science and International Studies

Conference Abstract:

The Internet has engendered a considerable level of debate in political discourse ever since its emergence as a tool in everyday life. With low voter turnout and civic participation in decline, much of the debate has come to focus on the Internet's ability to provide avenues for political participation and civic engagement. Enthusiasm for this potential waned slightly during the nineties, but it has been reignited recently with the rise of "Web 2.0", and its emphasis on user-generated content, social networking and collaboration. While the debate had led to discussions of participatory democracy, much of it fails to take into account the nature of participation, and what is advocated is often merely more communication. This paper will more closely examine the participatory avenues offered by Web 2.0 within a framework of participatory and democratic theory to show that it is unlikely to actually increase civic engagement. Furthermore, this discourse is heavily influenced by the evaluative nature of democracy and its associated concepts. This paper will explore how evaluative concepts such as democracy and participation are used in this debate to give credit to claims for the new technologies and to those using them.

We live in an age where the sheer size of our polities makes direct participation in political decision-making a practical impossibility for the vast majority of the population. Moreover, political participation can seem increasingly meaningless to many people, which is reflected in diminishing interest in civic engagement and declining rates of voter turnout around the world. Since the beginning of its rise to popularity, the Internet has raised hopes of democrats and political commentators that it will produce a re-energised participatory democracy. Its interactive nature, user-friendly interface and ubiquitous presence, coupled with its apparent inability to be controlled, has engendered idealistic claims that it may be used by citizens to “virtually” participate in their democracies as never before.

This idealism is certainly not unique to the Internet: any time an innovative technology takes hold in our society, its potential to beget a better polity and a closer more peaceful world are touted. The first great wired network, the telegraph, brought about similar hyperbole, with some advocates dreaming it would bring about world peace and make it impossible for war to happen with each country being so interlinked (see Standage 1998). The history of the twentieth century proved this ideal sadly and profoundly mistaken.

The early optimism of the Internet suffered during the late nineties as many began to see the web as more a tool for shopping and downloading porn than for high-minded discourse among citizens. With big media buying up popular sites and the burst of the dotcom bubble, the Internet appeared to be succumbing to the same fate of previous communications technologies, as hyperbole turned to disappointment. However, Internet idealism has had a resurgence, with the emergence of what has become known as “Web 2.0”. This enthusiasm reached perhaps its apotheosis recently with *Time Magazine* naming “You” as its person of the year, due to “Your” use of Web 2.0. The issue proclaims that through Web 2.0 Netizens are “founding and framing the new digital democracy” (Grossman 2006, 41). This type of optimistic language has become typical when discussing Web 2.0. For many commentators, the mere existence of a new medium through which to engage politically is in itself a solution to declining rates of participation. This “new” web is interactive, free, easy to use, relies on user-generated content, and gives “power to the people” (Grossman 2006, 42). It is offering renewed hope that this technology will breathe new life into democratic systems suffering under the weight of disengagement and cynicism.

This perspective, however, offers a simplistic quick-fix for democracy’s problems, and is likely to overlook some fundamental elements that must be considered to truly evaluate any role the Internet may play in engaging citizens. At this stage of its development, it is difficult to determine the potential effect of Web 2.0, but we can draw on what is already known about political participation and apply it to claims put forward in this debate. In this vein, this paper will investigate the claims of a renewed participatory democracy by looking specifically at two questions – who participates in politics and why. It will be shown that the overall effect on participation may not be as great as currently hoped and proclaimed. Web 2.0 is indeed offering some interesting alternatives for political engagement, but it doesn’t, of itself, change the factors that motivate people to

participate. Hence those who embrace Web 2.0 as a political tool will likely be those who are already engaged.

In addition this paper will raise a related aspect of this discourse: using valuable concepts to lend credence to online activities. Much of the rhetoric around Web 2.0 is steeped in some of the most valuable language in our political discourse. These concepts, such as *democracy* and *participation*, are used to label online activities so that it does appear at first glance that Web 2.0 has indeed opened up myriad new avenues for participation. However, a closer look shows that some Web 2.0-enabled interactions are being elevated to a significance they do not warrant. Instead of increased opportunities for participation, it is merely a redefinition.

Participation, Web 2.0 and “the disappearing demos”

Participation rates in western democracies are currently at an historic low, particularly among young people. As measured by all criteria, rates of participation have been growing steadily worse over the last half century. Where it is voluntary, less and less people are voting. This is a significant concern to any democracy, as the legitimacy of a government can be in question if only a minority of voters participate in elections. Beyond voting, other indicators of the health of civic engagement are also showing signs of trouble. Participation in civic associations is in decline, with Robert Putnam famously saying that we are now “bowling alone” (Putnam 1995). Membership of political parties is in freefall, leaving them at risk of becoming, in Stephen Coleman’s words “eccentric associations of the elderly and the obsessed” (Coleman 2005, 2). He also points out that even the most passive act of citizen engagement, information gathering through news and political analysis, is in decline (Coleman, 2). The level of citizen engagement is now so minimal that Coleman has used the term “the disappearing demos” to describe the decline of public interaction in democratic politics around the world (Coleman, 2).

It is in this political environment that Web 2.0 has captured the attention of politicians, political commentators, democrats and the public at large, as showing potential to offer new ways to engage citizens, particularly young people.

The term “Web 2.0” was coined in 2004 by O’Reilly Media as a title for a series of conferences. It describes the second generation of tools provided by the Internet which have interactive and participatory characteristics: social networking sites, wikis, communications tools, file-sharing, blogging, vlogging, torrents. The principles of Web 2.0 are participation and collaboration, with an emphasis on sharing of resources among users. According to O’Reilly Media, nowhere is this principle demonstrated better than through BitTorrent, which gets better the more people use it. It is a tool that has an implicit “architecture of participation” and a “built-in ethic of cooperation” that “harnesses the power of the users themselves” (O’Reilly 2005). These characteristics are intrinsic to all Web 2.0 tools and sites, such as Wikipedia, YouTube and Myspace.

Netizens have embraced Web 2.0 in huge numbers, with hundreds of millions of individuals writing blogs, uploading video, sharing files, and watching and reading

others' contributions. Politicians have come on board, many recognising the importance of this medium in attracting the attention of younger voters. Politicians all over the world now provide regular blogs and vlogs of their activities available through their own website, or through portals such as YouTube. Many politicians hail their use of these tools as innovative and a means to make them more accountable and more democratic, and Netizens are agreeing with this assessment. While the impact of Web 2.0 on our political systems is still unclear, all sides of this discussion view its emergence as positive for democracy, with many already describing a revived participatory democracy. The "disappearing demos" has apparently gone online.

This forecast for Web 2.0 and democracy is encouraging for those who believe democracy is ailing, and it is tempting to embrace this optimism. However, the aim here is to avoid overly simplistic speculations and instead adopt a more realistic view, grounded in the body of research on political participation. To further this approach, we now turn to the question of participation itself: what is participation?

Like other concepts associated with democracy, participation is a contested term. It is a term that has value in our political system, but is also vague. Participation can take many forms, from the most passive act of watching the TV news, through to voting, to civic involvement, to standing for political office. As Carole Pateman pointed out in the seventies, the widespread use of the term in the mass media has "tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared" and that the term has come to be "used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people." (Pateman 1970, 1). JR Lucas agrees with this assessment, saying that participation "has come into vogue... but like many vogue words, it is vague". He goes on to say: "Everybody wants it, but is not at all clear what 'it' is." Lucas 1976, 136). The addition of online forms of participation can only further complicate this situation.

Given this ambiguity, any attempt to define precisely what participation is, or further, what meaningful participation can consist of, is remarkably difficult. In ancient Greece, anything less than active participation in giving judgement and holding office would not have been considered democratic. In fact, citizenship was predicated on active involvement in public affairs (Held 1987, 36). This contrasts sharply with Schumpeter's notion of democracy, which he saw as simply a method for choosing decision-makers through a competitive struggle for the votes of the people. In his view, voting is the only political act of the people and any other form of participation is irrelevant (Maddox 1996, 95). Most people would not take this position as the ideal for democracy, and instead consider voting as a minimum level of participation. Both Anthony Birch and Giovanni Sartori agree that the opportunity to vote in periodic competitive elections is the minimum requirement to qualify as a democracy (Birch 2001, 104), and Sartori goes on to say that that meaningful participation must be something more; that to deem voting and participation as synonymous is a very minimal view of democracy which "leaves us with a very weak and overly diluted meaning of the term" (Sartori 1987, 113). For Robert Dahl, *effective participation* is considered the first of his four criteria for democratic process, and by this he means giving citizens the opportunity to place questions on the agenda and to express their preferences throughout the process of

making binding decisions (Dahl 1989, 109). Lucas points out that participation can take many forms, and that even “merely to know what decisions are being taken, and why, is to be in them” (Lucas 136). This is a much diluted form of participation, and while being informed is an important step, such a passive act cannot be considered meaningful participation. For such a label to be applicable a higher level of commitment is required encompassing proactive behaviour, ideally leading to involvement in binding decision-making. Simply reading information online is not meaningful participation. Nor is blogging necessarily, but may be a step toward deliberative communication with fellow citizens.

Basic online interactions such as these are often described as forms of *participation*, and this is partly to leverage the value inherent in this concept and other concepts related to democracy. There are few concepts in our political discourse that carry as much appraisive value as *democracy* –Sartori calls it a “universally honorific word” (Sartori, 4) – but all concepts in the democracy conceptual “constellation” carry this value. Appraisive concepts do more than just act as a label, they can also be used as tools to channel political thought and to give something value. By describing blogging as a form of democratic *participation*, this act receives significance that is not conveyed by describing it merely as a form of writing. In this way, commentators can put forward the notion that participation is indeed increasing, when

One example of a concept being drawn on to bestow credibility on an activity is the use of the term *deliberation* or *deliberative democracy* to describe communication in the blogosphere. A recent paper on the subject has argued that:

“New advances in information technology have opened up the Internet as a new ‘public square’ for deliberative democracy”. (Maynor, 2007, 3)

Bloggers are keen to describe their domain in this way, stating that “the blogosphere offers an embryonic deliberative democracy”¹. However, most of the discussion on Web 2.0 does not meet the criteria to be described as real deliberation. Communication must be more than just ordinary conversation to achieve the appellation *deliberation*. To truly deserve the name, public conversation should be among a heterogeneous group of people with diverging perspectives who engage in discussion and debate (Witschge 2004, 110).

“What makes opinion deliberative is not merely that it has been built upon careful contemplation, evidence, and supportive arguments, but also that it has grasped and taken into consideration the opposing view of others.” (Price, Cappella and Nir 2002, as quoted in Witschge 2004, 118)

Unfortunately, heterogeneity is not currently an apposite characteristic of the blogosphere. Most discussion online takes place within homogenous groups of like-

¹ Slugger O’Toole, blog entry 23 February 2007:
<http://sluggerotoole.com/index.php/weblog/comments/blogging-towards-a-deliberative-democracy/>

minded individuals which actually shut-out dissenting opinion. Ferguson and Griffiths, in their analysis of political blogging in the UK in 2005, found that:

“bloggers have congregated around entrenched and static views, rarely stepping into a deliberative environment where their views are exposed to experiences, ideas of information that differ from those they have generated themselves”. (Ferguson and Griffiths, p 373).

Under these conditions, the term *deliberation* does not apply to this kind of communication, but is being invoked to elevate online communication to a form of participation. These terms act as conceptual bridges, so that writing a blog becomes a form of political communication, which becomes conflated to political discourse, then to deliberation, which carries credibility as a form of meaningful participation. In this way, it may at first appear that Web 2.0 is indeed instigating participation and engagement, but a closer look shows that participatory concepts are being “stretched” to apply to online interactions. However, real deliberation is a very demanding activity; and consequently people find it threatening and generally avoid it (Witschge 2004, 111). This situation is the same online as it is in real life. Web 2.0 may provide avenues for those who are truly willing to deliberate and participate, but it is unlikely to be a widespread phenomenon across the entire blogosphere. We can “stretch” our political concepts to apply them to online activity, but it doesn’t change the underlying limitations on mass participation: meaningful political participation will continue to be a demanding activity that is undertaken by the few. This is a point that will be developed further below, but first we will review some examples of people utilising Web 2.0 tools for political use.

PARTICIPATION AND THE INTERNET

Each time a new media has taken on a central role in our daily lives there has been debate over its impact on the political system generally and on participation specifically. In 1948 Lazarsfeld and Merton warned that radio news could bring about a “narcotising dysfunction” to politics, which may produce a sense of belonging and involvement, but cannot properly be considered political participation (Katz 1998, 93). When television was introduced, the debate raged far more widely and vigorously, as its introduction has significantly changed the political landscape. The effect of this medium was profound and swift: Asa Briggs noted attendance at political party meetings dropped 50 per cent in the very early days of television, 1950-1954 (Katz 1998, 93).

From its earliest days, the Internet has been considered “different” from previous media, not only as a technology, but as offering a potential solution to political deficiencies. Unlike radio and television, the Internet is interactive and provides tools that allow individual citizens to communicate with each other and with their elected representatives in a way that is easy and inexpensive. Through the use of these tools, it is hoped, citizens will once again participate in politics, reinvigorating our democracies. However, thus far, the literature on the role of the Internet in encouraging or mobilising political or social participation has been mixed. Some studies have shown that Internet use can actually

lead to alienation from an individual's own community (Weber et al 2003, 39), while others find that those spending time online are more likely to be already involved in their own communities offline. So far, we have seen little evidence that the Internet in and of itself will produce a more participatory democracy, but the rise of Web 2.0 is considered a "new" kind of political tool, and is causing a re-think in the role the Internet may play in politics.

Participation, Web 2.0 and "Viral Democracy"

There have been several high-profile uses of Web 2.0 tools in politics recently, most particularly in the US mid-term elections, and also in the increasingly media-saturated race for the 2008 US presidential nomination.

The Pew Internet Project report on the 2006 US Mid-Term Elections describes the campaign as "an important breakthrough moment for online video and politics" (Rainie and Horrigan 2006, 16). The report cites three examples of citizen-created and disseminated video that had an impact on the campaigns of the candidates involved. The first is the now notorious "macaca" video of George Allen; the second is video of Montana Senator Burns sleeping during Senate business; and the third is of Sue Kelly, who was captured fleeing reporters asking questions about the Mark Foley scandal. All three lost their races for re-election. It is commonly assumed, by this report's authors and others, that the dissemination of the footage through the Web, particularly through YouTube, was a significant factor to these candidates' losses, particularly in the George Allen case².

This has led to claims that with the tools of Web 2.0, the time has come for the Internet to play a significant role in politics. Raul Fernandez of the *Washington Post* believes the Internet will have as much effect on elections as the coming of TV had, but that it will "be better for the long-term health of our democracy" because "Internet-driven politics is about... empowerment and participation" (Fernandez 2006). He heralds the new political environment that now allows citizens to create and publish their own political content and declares "welcome to viral democracy", a reference to the term used when content online gains widespread popularity through file sharing.³ In reviewing the role of the Internet, particularly the tools of Web 2.0, in the mid-term elections, he claims that it:

"has empowered ordinary citizens to become engaged, active and highly influential participants in democracy, instead of passive consumers of campaign rhetoric." (Fernandez 2006)

² For commentary see eg:

The Boston Globe, "On the Attack on YouTube", 23 March 2007; "Whitehouse Candidates Exploit YouTube", The St Petersburg Times, 2 March 2007.

Heather Greenfield, "Unhappy Trails for Incumbents Felled by YouTube", Technology Daily, 10 November 2006.

³ The term presumably arose from drawing analogy to a virus' ability to replicate or copy itself continually.

Fernandez is far from alone in this assertion. Scott Orr from *The Star Ledger* agrees that the Internet is “giving rise to a greater ability of the public to participate in the political discourse” (Orr 2006). Julie Barko Germany, Deputy Director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, said:

“YouTube has allowed people to engage in politics in a way they can create content.” “You may not be out there volunteering, you might not be interested in volunteering, but can do this from your home.” (as quoted in Reed 2006)

The same enthusiasm and expectation of citizen participation via the Internet is starting to become part of US presidential campaigns, with all candidates using vlogs as part of their communications strategies. Hillary Clinton even chose to use the Internet as the medium to announce her candidacy, and she will be holding live online chats throughout the campaign. Google CEO, Eric Schmidt, has said that the candidate that “takes advantage of [the Internet] most effectively” will “be the winners of the next election”.⁴ YouTube has created a new channel called *YouTube You Choose 08*, inviting the main candidates to post their own messages and videos. Yahoo has also set up a portal for campaign information called “*You Witness*”, which includes news, video, photos, and questions with the candidates.

To some degree, the expected use of Web 2.0 for political purposes has been realised, and the extent to which some individuals will make use of these tools has indeed taken political campaigners by surprise. Candidates’ ability to totally control their own message was given a battering earlier this year when a video portraying Hillary Clinton as Big Brother was posted to YouTube and viewed more than 4 million times, in other words, it went *viral*. The resulting media frenzy around this video brought amateur video to the fore in the presidential campaign, and resulted in predictions that this type of campaigning will prove crucial in the upcoming US presidential elections. The ad, which was described as “perhaps the most groundbreaking attack ad in the young 21st century” (Marinucci 2006a), was created by Philip de Vellis on his home computer, who believes “The game has changed” (Marinucci 2006a). Online commentators immediately heralded a new age of citizen-media, arguing that the tools of Web 2.0, most particularly YouTube, would change the political landscape.

Andrew Rasiej, founder of TechPresident.com and publisher of the Personal Democracy Forum gushed:

“It definitely is pointing to a shift in the way in which voters are able to effect the discourse of a presidential campaign.” And “This is a watershed moment in history of politics, where the roles, the traditional roles of the passive voter have been shifted to more activist.” (Landers 2007).

Simon Rosenberg, President of New Democrat Network said:

⁴ “Google CEO Calls Internet Crucial to 2008 Race,” Technology Daily, 30 November 2006.

“It has dramatised a brave new world in which passionate activists outside the structure of traditional campaigns have the power to shape the message.” And that political activists, instead of being merely passive, are now *“partners in the fight.”* (Marinucci 2006a).

Peter Leydon, Director of the New Politics Institute said:

“What we’re going through now is a phase shift in politics – which is going from a top-down centralised hierarchical world to a much more democratised, bottom-up, participatory form.” (as quoted in Marinucci 2007b)

This video gained a lot of attention online, and later also through mainstream media, and has become symbolic of the role Web 2.0 has the potential to play in election campaigns. Much of this potential is considered to be in the area of citizen engagement, with the Internet being described as a “participatory medium and a contact sport” where you “can’t get much done from the sidelines”⁵.

POLITICAL PARTICIPANTS

The George Allen “macaca” and Clinton-Big Brother videos are indicative of the way citizens can use the tools of Web 2.0 to make a political statement that can have real-life repercussions. There is no doubt that Web 2.0 is providing new means for citizens to participate. However, the claim that it will lead to a more democratised, participatory political system is less straightforward. In the next section, I will more closely examine this claim by considering two questions pertaining to political participation: who participates and why. By examining the factors that lead people to participate we can develop a better understanding of the effect Web 2.0 may have on encouraging political participation.

Why do People Participate?

As mentioned above, our democracies are currently facing declining participation rates, leading to increased disengagement and cynicism. This situation is of concern for the future of our democratic systems, and there is a need to find ways to re-engage citizens. Web 2.0 indeed provides numerous avenues for political involvement. By blogging, vlogging or chatting citizens can engage in political debate with fellow citizens. Citizens can watch their representatives online through video or podcasts and read their sites to see what they’re up to. They can create political content to support their candidate or promote their own political cause. However, before we can assess the potential impact of any of these new online participatory activities, we need to consider the prior question of what motivates citizens to participate in the first place.

Web 2.0, it is argued, will lead to a new re-engaged citizenry and increased levels of participation. However, this argument is built on the assumption that low levels of

⁵ “The Way We Politick: An Update on the Internet Effect”, Greensboro News and Record, 18 February 2007.

participation are due to lack of opportunities for involvement, rather than lack of interest on the part of citizens. Can we assume that currently disengaged citizens will spontaneously participate simply because they have new and easier ways to do so? Current research shows that this is unlikely. Political participation is hindered by a problem bigger than lack of opportunities: apathy and lack of interest. Generally speaking, the level of enthusiasm for participating in politics is very low. Politics is simply not interesting enough to hold the attention of a vast majority of the population. As Sartori points out “the ordinary citizen has little interest in politics” and consequently “citizen participation is minimal if not sub-minimal” (Sartori 1987, 103).

On the surface, the tools of Web 2.0 appear to be a remarkable boon for democracy, and if taken up by the majority of citizens, could indeed transform our political system. But this could be said for many innovations. The opportunities for citizens in democracies to participate and make a difference in their political systems have always been present, but have not been taken up by the majority of citizens. And this appears to be unchanged in the Web 2.0 world. Despite these tools being new, exciting, cheap, user-friendly and freely available, most citizens are simply not availing themselves of the opportunity to use them for politics. More often than not, Web 2.0 is used for pursuing personal interests, pop culture concerns, and sharing of fetishes. Statistics show that recreational sites get far more hits than political ones⁶. YouTube acknowledges that the *You Choose 08* channel will not be their most popular channel. Barack Obama’s homepage on YouTube is the most popular of the presidential candidates’ sites and has about 1,900 subscribers, whereas the homepage of pop princess Ashley Tisdale has more than 13,500 subscribers (Schatz 2007). This pattern is repeated across the Internet.

At present activity on the Internet shows little indication of enhanced civic engagement, but rather shows individuals pursuing their own interests and entertainment. Instead of providing new avenues for political involvement, the Internet appears to be giving increased consequence to pop culture matters, making them the focus of our engagement with others online and leaving less time for political concerns. As J Michael Sproule has pointed out in reference to the declining role of rhetoric in our democracies:

“Popular culture, as expressed in the rise of film, radio, and professional sports, offered non-civic vehicles of participation whereby people felt involved and connected without actually engaging their powers of citizenship.” (Sproule 2002, 302)

This pattern appears to be continuing its trend in the age of the Internet as people pursue other matters rather than political involvement.

This apathy and lack of interest notwithstanding, some citizens are motivated to participate, but this rarely happens spontaneously. Political participation is generally

⁶ See for instance this report that shows that political use of the Internet is very low: Dutton, William H; Helsper, Helen, J; “The Internet in Britain 2007”, Oxford Internet Institute, http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/oxis/OxIS2007_Report.pdf, p 72. Also, no websites that are specifically political in content are ever mentioned in most popular website lists.

triggered by changes in an individual's circumstances rather than by changes in the means of participation. Typically, participation arises from discontent with a decision already taken (Lucas 1976, 146). Citizens participate in order to redress a grievance or change a decision that has affected them adversely.

“Citizens do, of course, sometimes participate extra-electorally in politics, but such engagement is often prompted by feelings of grievance against particular actions of government rather than by the recognition of ordinary civic duty.” (Bishop et al 2002, 65)

The arrival of Web 2.0 is unlikely to alter this underlying motivation for participation. While web-based tools can make participation easier, it does not necessarily create increased impetus for citizens to seek civic engagement. The Clinton-Big Brother video bares out this conclusion, highlighting how a citizen is more likely to get involved because of something they dislike rather than to promote an issue they proactively believe in. It is much easier to use YouTube to condemn your opponent than to support your candidate, and Web 2.0 is particularly well-suited to this sort of activity.

While Web 2.0 is definitely providing new avenues for participation, we cannot assume that this alone will generate greater numbers of participants. Throughout its history, democracy has been plagued by apathy and indifference, and it is possible that the Internet could be distracting attention away from civic concerns rather than the reverse. For those who do participate, motivation comes from factors related to their own interests, not merely the opportunities for participation. People need a reason to participate, not just a place to do it, and typically that reason is to address a grievance. Only a concomitant change in the impetus for political participation will see Web 2.0 reach its potential as a political tool.

Who Participates?

The previous section draws attention to a limitation on the participatory promise of Web 2.0; the unchanged factors that motivate individuals to seek political engagement. This section will investigate a further aspect of participation by reviewing what is known about those who choose to participate. If Web 2.0 provides new ways for people to participate in democracy, who can we expect to take up these opportunities?

Unfortunately for Internet advocates, current research is showing that those who participate online are also those who participate offline. Online activists are more likely to be the same citizens who are already engaged with the political system, rather than the disengaged becoming involved for the first time. Bruce Bimber has researched the participatory potential of the Internet at length. He believes asking the question of whether the Internet can get people to participate is ambiguous and unintelligible, and should therefore be divided in two in order to get closer to an answer (Bimber 2004, 7). The two questions are then: does the Internet lead more people to participate?; and does the Internet lead already active people to participate more in different ways and on different issues. The answer to the first question is, according to Bimber, “not much”,

but the answer to the second is “yes” (Bimber 2004, 7). He argues that survey research so far indicates very little effect by the Internet on levels of engagement, as in almost all cases, those that are using the tools of the Internet for political purposes are the same people who were engaged before. He points out that “citizens frequently fail to live up to the technologists’ expectations of them”, but he argues that this is the fault of the expectations, not the citizens (Bimber 2004, 2). Recent research is showing that there is little change from Bimber’s findings. In their study of online news gathering during the 2006 US mid-term elections, the PEW Internet and American Life Project describes the “online political activist cohort” as “highly active and engaged citizens, not only on the Internet, but in civic life in general” (Rainie and Horrigan 2007, 17).

Instead of encouraging widespread participation among citizens, Web 2.0 is providing new ways and new opportunities for already engaged people to do what they have always done. Again, the Clinton-Big Brother example demonstrates this conclusion. The creator of this video was unknown for several days, but it later became known that the author was Philip de Vellis, who had worked on Obama’s campaign. In other words, a person already engaged with the political system. His first act was to send the video through progressive listservs and chat rooms with which he was already acquainted, and it was this wide dissemination through political connections that resulted in the video going “viral”. Had he not already had contacts through which he could distribute the video, and simply posted it up to YouTube with millions of other videos, it might have gone unnoticed. Experience, knowledge and contacts remain important, and using Web 2.0 for political purposes is still the domain of “political junkies” (Martin 2006).

An additional point that needs to be raised in examining who may take up online participation is the composition of the online population. This is an issue that is often overlooked, but is a significant one, as it reinforces the previous point. Those who already participate in politics generally are of a higher socio-economic level of society, and this is even more the case on the Internet. Internet use and access are strongly related to socioeconomic status (Bimber 2000, 870).

The PEW study found that 31% of Americans used the Internet during the campaign to get political news and information and to discuss the campaign via email. This indicates that one-third of Americans are using the Internet to involve themselves in political discourse during an election (Rainie and Horrigan, ii). The research also found that race and gender have ceased to be dividing lines in the Internet population (Rainie and Horrigan, 17). These are indeed encouraging statistics, and the latest report shows that the online population is far more diverse than the “online political junkies” of the 1996 report. But the research still shows that the online population is disproportionately composed of people with university degrees and who live in households earning more than \$75,000 (Rainie and Horrigan, 11). Moreover, those who consider the Internet as an important political news source are relatively young – under 36 years old, and have broadband connections at home (Rainie and Horrigan, ii). These results are not unique to the US. In their evaluation of British Internet users in 2003 and 2005, Di Gennaro and Dutton found widespread inequalities persist with regard to Internet adoption, as Internet users were more likely to be male, younger, more highly educated and from a higher

income bracket (Di Gennaro et al 2006, 302). Furthermore, the survey results show that the disengaged are even less likely to use the Internet to search for political information or to contact a politician than they would offline, indicating that “inequalities in offline participation tend to be reproduced and magnified in online participation” (Di Gennaro et al, 305).

These findings give cause for concern that the digital divide persists in limiting the diversity of the online population, and this undermines the claim that Web 2.0 may produce a new participatory politics. Socioeconomic factors continue to heavily influence a person’s likelihood to be politically engaged, whether online or offline. Indeed, Weber et al find that “the Internet appears to exacerbate the socioeconomic bias already exhibited by civic and political participation” (Weber et al 2003, 39). Manuel Castell’s has argued the same point, stating that:

“... because access to computer-mediated communication is culturally, educationally, and economically restrictive, and will be so for a long time, the most important cultural impact of computer-mediated communication could be potentially the reinforcement of culturally dominant social networks.” (as quoted in Putnam 2000, 175).

In view of this conclusion, the claim that the Internet will increase participation levels appears flawed. Those who are most likely to take up the new tools offered by Web 2.0 are those who are already political engaged. While this is a very positive development for those citizens, as they now have new, easy and cheap means to engage on a global basis, it is unlikely to draw the politically unengaged and uninterested into politics on a large scale. According to Bimber, those who are being energised into political participation by the Internet are “so small in number, they are statistically difficult to work with” (Bimber 2004, 9). Involvement in politics depends on capacity and motivation: citizens must want to participate, and they must have the capacity to do so (Bimber 1998, 142). The Internet doesn’t change the people who have these characteristics. The majority of the politically active online are active offline as well, and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSION

The aim here has not been to discount any benefits that may arise from the advent of Web 2.0, but rather to evaluate claims for those potential benefits realistically. The current political climate of disengagement and cynicism makes the prospect of a Web 2.0-driven revitalised participatory democracy very appealing, but a closer examination shows that promise to be unsubstantiated. It is too early to accurately identify any changes in our political systems or in the behaviour of citizens due to Web 2.0, but we can draw on already existing research on political participation and use it to develop a better understanding of the political potential for Web 2.0. Unfortunately for Internet advocates, the anticipated gains for democracy may not be as great as hoped. Participation rarely happens spontaneously, but is rather stimulated by factors specific to

an individual's experiences, motivations and capacities. Because of this, technological tools, regardless of their simplicity, cost and ubiquity, can not increase participation in and of themselves because they do not alter the factors that motivate an individual to participate. Furthermore, the characteristics that are pertinent to predicting whether an individual will participate in politics appear to be similar for the Internet as for the real world, so that those who take up the opportunities presented by Web 2.0 are likely to be already engaged in the political process. The effect of the digital divide should not be underestimated as contributor to this phenomenon, as the socio-economic demographics of offline participants are mirrored or even exacerbated online.

While Web 2.0 offers some interesting prospects for online engagement and interaction, it is unlikely to provide the answer to the 'disappearing demos'.

References

- Bimber, Bruce, 2004, "The Citizen in an Age of Electronic Governance", From: Proceedings of the Australian Electronic Governance Conference 2004, April 13-14, University of Melbourne.
- Bimber, Bruce, 2001, "Information and Political Engagement in America: The Search for Effects of Information Technology at the Individual Level", *Political Research Quarterly*, 54 (1): 53-67.
- Bimber, Bruce, 2000, "Measuring the Gender Gap on the Internet", *Social Science Quarterly*, 81 (3): 868-876.
- Bimber, Bruce, 1998, "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism", *Polity*, 31 (1): 133-159.
- Birch, Anthony H. 2001. *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Bishop, Patrick; Kane, John and Patapan, Haig, 2002, "E-Democracy: Technological Challenges to Democratic Theory", *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Vol 17 (2): 55-68.
- Coleman, Stephen, 2005, "Direct Representation: Towards a Conversational Democracy", Institute for Public Policy Research publication, http://www.ippr.org.uk/ecommm/files/Stephen_Coleman_Pamphlet.pdf.
- Connelly, William. 1993. *Terms of Political Discourse 3rd Edition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Dahl, Robert. 1989. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Di Gennaro, Corinna; Dutton, William. 2006. "The Internet and the Public: Online and Offline Political Participation in the United Kingdom", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59 (2), 299-313.
- Ferguson, Ross; Griffiths, Barry. 2006. "Thin Democracy? Parliamentarians, Citizens and the Influence of Blogging on Political Engagement", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 59 (2), 366-374.
- Fernandez, Raul, 9 December 2007 "Uploading American Politics". *The Washington Post*.
- Grossman, Lev, 2006. "Person of the Year: You". *Time*. December 25.
- Held, David. 1987. *Models of Democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Katz, Elihu. 1998. "Mass Media and Participatory Democracy". In *The Changing Nature of Democracy*, ed Takashi Inoguchi, Edward Newman and John Keane. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.
- Landers, Kim, 25 March 2007. "Internet weighs into US Presidential Campaign". ABC Correspondents Report, <http://www.abc.net.au/correspondents/content/2007/s1880388.htm>, consulted 26 March 2007.
- Lucas, J.R. 1976. *Democracy and Participation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Maddox, Graham. 1996, *Australian Democracy in Theory and Practice, 3rd Edition*. Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Maynor, John W. 2007. "Blogging for Democracy: Autonomy and Reasonableness in the Blogosphere". Paper presented at the meeting to the Midwest Political Science Association. <http://www.internetadvocacycenter.com/thinktank/topics/articles/Maynor.pdf>.
- Marinucci, Carla. 22 March 2007a. "Obama Supporter Owns up to Video". *The San Francisco Chronicle*, , downloaded 3 April 2007. <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/03/22/HILLARYAD.TMP> Consulted 3 April 2007.
- Marinucci, Carla. 1 April 2007b. "Campaign 2008: Buying Brand X". *SFGate.com*. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2007/04/01/CAMPAIGN.TMP&type=printable>, Consulted 4 April 2007.
- Martin, Jonathon. 19 October 2006. "Many Political Ads Online, But Who Sees Them?". *The Seattle Times*.

- O'Reilly, Tim. 2005. "What is Web 2.0".
<http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html?page=2>. 9/30/2005. Consulted 6 March 2007.
- Orr, Scott, 2006. "Voters Beware: Internet Gives Free Rein to Jabs – Bring Your Own Filter to the Political Wild West". The Star Ledger, 30 October.
- Pateman, Carole. 1970. *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: The University Press.
- Putnam, Robert. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital". *Journal of Democracy*, 6 (1): 65-78
- Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rainie, Lee and Horrigan, John. 2007. "Election 2006 Online". The Pew Internet and American Life Project, January 17 2007.
- Andrew Rasiej, Andrew, and Sifry, Micah L. 20 June 2007, "Viral video infecting political landscape" Consulted 26 June 2007.
<http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=4A427034-3048-5C12-006F9C58BAD5D8>.
- Reed, Tina, 30 October 2006. "YouTube Puts Political Lives Online". The Las Vegas Review.
- Sartori, Giovanni. 1987. *Theory of Democracy Revisited*. New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers.
- Schatz, Amy. 2007. "Candidates Get Their Tube", The Wall Street Journal, 2 March.
- Witschge, Tamara. 2004. "Online Possibilities of the Internet for Deliberative Democracy". In *Online Democracy: The Prospects for Political Renewal through the Internet*, ed Shane, Peter. New York: Routledge
- Sproule, J. Michael. 2002. "Oratory, Democracy, and the Culture of Participation". *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 5 (2); 301-310.
- Standage, Tom. 1998. *The Victorian Internet*. New York: Berkley Books.
- Walhof, Darren R. 2005, "Bringing the Deliberative Back In: Gadamer on Conversation and Understanding", *Contemporary Political Theory*, 4: 154-174.
- Weber, Lori M; Loumakis, Alysha; Bergman, James, 2003, "Who Participates and Why?: An Analysis of Citizens on the Internet and the Mass Public", *Social Science Computer Review*, 21 (1): 26-42.