Part 2
Media Use, Government, and Websites
Chapter 5
Media Use in the United States: Electronic Media Dramatically Up and Print Media Down

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Abstract
This research project traces the media use habits of children and adults. Over time, television consumption is increasing even though computer and Internet activities are also rapidly increasing. The American people are consuming greater amounts of electronic media while traditional newspaper use is declining. It appears that people are not connecting face to face as much as in the past and live more and more in the individualized world of media. Furthermore, a digital divide based on socio-economic status and race is evident. Blacks use television more than Whites and Hispanics and African Americans and Hispanics use the computer less than Whites. Both of the developments of increased media use and the digital divide do not bode well for 1) building the social capital of connectedness, and 2) widening access to political information which fuels democracy. The political socialization process and hence American political culture are developing new patterns which should be carefully monitored in the future.

Introduction
The most comprehensive media study in existence for children is administered and distributed by the Kaiser Family Foundation. The first comprehensive report released was in 1999, called Kids and Media at the New Millennium, which was the primary data source used for our previous research project, “Television and the Internet’s Effects on the Socialization of American Children” (German and Lally, 2005). As the Kaiser Family Foundation found it necessary to update their report in 2004 due to significant changes in media technology, it is important to continue to write about what types of implications these significant changes have for the future of American society. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine the patterns of media use by all Americans – not just children – as the current trend in the US has become particularly focused on a consumer society in which the individual reigns supreme and participation in community activities is increasingly absent. To supplement what the Kaiser Family Foundation has done for children, the US Department of Commerce has put together “A Nation Online,” a two-part publication exploring
how Americans use the Internet and the effects of the rapidly growing broadband technologies on media consumption, and a study released by the Pew Research Center entitled “Internet News Takes Off” (Pew Research Center, 2005). Although these studies are not as comprehensive as the Kaiser project, they serve as a good indication about who is accessing what types of media and what they are concerned about while searching information. The issues most prevalent in American society related to media use tend to be 1) access, 2) amount of daily media use, and 3) content of media. These three factors are extremely important because not only do they result in a lack of participation in community activities (social capital), but also access and information quality may be a major contributing factor in what is known as the “digital divide” between socio-economic classes. This chapter begins with a discussion of the previous research and conclusions of several scholars, followed by a profile of American children’s and adults’ media consumption habits and access, and ends with a brief discussion of the implications these trends have for American society and politics.

Past and Present: Where Does American Society Stand Today When Compared to the Past?

In 2000, Robert Putnam released his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Since then, he has been considered one of the premier scholars on the issue of the waning fund of social capital in the US: “Civic engagement and social capital entail mutual obligation and responsibility for action” (Putnam, 2000, p. 21). He and many other scholars believe that the only way to repair social connections in the US is “to ask how the positive consequences of social capital – mutual support, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness – can be maximized and the negative manifestations – sectarianism, ethnocentrism, corruption – minimized” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). According to Putnam, one form of social capital that is important to look at is participation in politics. While Americans participate at roughly the same levels as other democracies worldwide, albeit a bit lower in voter turnout, the important differences appear when examining what Putnam calls “inter and intra generational cohorts” (Putnam, 2000, pp. 32-27). Putnam says that while it is true that there are wide gaps in voter participation and general interest in politics both between generations and when comparing people of similar ages in differing decades, he believes that these are just the most visible symptoms of a larger problem that faces the American nation. While voting and information gathering can be done relatively alone, things like party identification and volunteering in political campaigns are more community-based activities that add to social networks. Party identification has dropped from around 75% in the 1960s to lower than 65% in the 1990s (Putnam, 2000, p. 38). The levels at which people worked for a party in the 1980s and 1990s have dropped by nearly 50% from the 1950s and 1960s; however, the number of people contacted by the parties
was nearly 2.5 times greater in 1996 than in 1968 (Putnam, 2000, p. 39). Putnam notes that it is very hard to reconcile this fact and the growing intake of capital by the political parties, but he concludes that this is an indication of the “professionalfication and commercialization of politics in America” and that this growth of money in politics simply has created professional politics aimed at mass marketing strategies (Putnam, 2000, pp. 39-49). Another important aspect of social capital is civic participation – in what numbers and how often are Americans participating in groups? Alexis de Tocqueville famously wrote:

> Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute … Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America (cited in Putnam, 2000, p. 48).

However, the associations of today are truly a different beast from what de Tocqueville observed over 170 years ago. Increasingly, groups that have been founded after 1965 have mass membership and are what Putnam calls “mailing list organizations” (Putnam, 2000, p. 51). His example is the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) in which fewer than 10% of its 33 million members actually attend any type of meeting. For many associations in the US today, there is little to no interaction; the only type of involvement necessary is writing and mailing a check (Putnam, 2000, p. 51). Putnam believes that it is important that we differentiate between these new types of organizations, which he refers to as “tertiary associations” where there is no social contact, and organizations like prayer groups or gardening clubs, which are called secondary associations. In tertiary associations, members’ ties are to common beliefs and leaders but not to each other (Putnam, 2000, p. 52). As an example of the decline in participation of Americans in chapter-based organizations, Putnam cites the case of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Parent Teacher Associations were at the height of their membership, with nearly 50% of parents with children under the age of 18 in school attending PTA meetings. Today, that membership level has decreased to less than 20% of parents with school-aged children participating in PTA meetings (Putnam, 2000, p. 57). So, Putnam points out that while many people look at growing membership trends in organizations, this may not be an accurate predictor of Americans’ levels of civic engagement (Putnam, 2000, p. 58). We must look at active and involved membership encompassing face-to-face contact with members of a community.

A third type of social capital that Putnam discusses is religious participation. Members of religious groups are more likely to participate in other civic and political organizations. About 50% to 60% of churchgoing members volunteer at some organization as opposed to 30% to 35% of non-members (Putnam, 2000,
Religious organizations have been at the cornerstone of many historic American movements – in particular the civil rights movement:

The Black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement ... Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which the protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle (Putnam, 2000, p. 68).

While there is much debate about what should be classified as church membership and which records are right – Gallup polls or church records – Putnam (2000, p. 72) concludes that claiming church membership and actual attendance have two different measures. While Americans are 10% less likely to claim church membership now than in the 1950s and 1960s, they are anywhere from 25% to 50% less likely to actually attend any church services. Some of the gaps in this data come particularly from people who claim a religion, but do not attend church (Putnam, 2000, p. 72). Again, as discussed in relation to political and civic engagement, significant religious participation can be seen between generational cohorts. People today are attending church in fewer numbers than people in similar age categories in the 1950s and 1960s and American churches today are far less engaged in the community, which only contributes to the declining social connectedness within communities (Putnam, 2000, p. 79). Specifically, “the boomers” born in the years immediately after World War II where an estimated two-thirds who were raised religious, “dropped out” of their religious tradition, as described by Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney:

Large numbers of young, well-educated, middle class youth ... defected from the churches in the late sixties and the seventies ... Some joined new religious movements, others sought personal enlightenment through various spiritual therapies and disciplines, but most simply ‘dropped out’ of organized religion altogether ... [The consequence was a] tendency toward highly individualized religious psychology without the benefits of strong supportive attachments to believing communities. A major impetus in this direction in the post-1960s was the thrust toward greater personal fulfilment and quest for the ideal self ... In this climate of expressive individualism, religion tends to become ‘privatized,’ or more anchored in the personal realms (cited in Putnam, 2000, p. 74).

Why is American Society Losing Social Capital?

Most of the time when pollsters ask Americans why they tend not to participate in civic activities, the answer is “I don’t have time.” The number of Americans who “always feel rushed” has more than doubled since the 1960s (Putnam, 2000, p. 89). While there is still much debate, most economists fall into one of two categories when discussing whether or not Americans work more today than they did in the 1950s and 1960s. Some economists, such as Ellen McGrattan and Richard
Rogerson, say that Americans are working about the same number of hours per week as they have been since World War II (Putnam, 2000, p. 190). However, there are some economists, such as John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey, who say that Americans actually have about 6.2 more hours of free time on average than they did in the 1950s. These economists attribute this figure to improved technology for housework, fewer children, and early retirement (Putnam, 2000, p. 190). While it may seem that some free time has been gained, scholars believe that this gain in leisure time seems only to affect less educated classes of people. In 1969, highly educated people worked an average of six hours more per week than high school educated people and in 1998, they worked 13 hours more per week. However, even if certain segments of the population seem to be busier than others, there is actually a positive correlation between number of hours worked and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000, p. 191).

As society progresses, technology, specifically the technology of communication, has become more and more present in our daily lives. Since 1948, television has increasingly become an important aspect of Americans’ lives. Putnam (2000, p. 217) quotes T.S. Elliot as having observed television as “a medium of entertainment, which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain alone.” However, the first forms of mass communication were not visual or audio mediums like television and radio, but newspapers. Alexis de Tocqueville described the importance of the newspaper in civic engagement:

> When no firm and lasting ties any longer unite men, it is impossible to obtain the cooperation of any great number of them unless you can persuade every man whose help is required that he serves his private interests by voluntarily uniting his efforts to those of all the others. That cannot be done habitually and conveniently without the help of a newspaper. Only a newspaper can put the same thought at the same times before a thousand readers. So hardly any democratic association can carry on without a newspaper (cited in Putnam, 2000, p. 218).

Still today, newspaper readers continue to be the most well-educated and the citizens most likely to participate in civic life. However, the number of people who read newspapers has declined rapidly in the past couple of decades as people turn more and more to electronic media (Putnam, 2000, pp. 218-219). Further, while Americans spend a great deal of time watching the television, like people who read the news, the number of people who watch the news is also on the decline.

Putnam says it is important to consider the fact that nothing has had a more profound effect on leisure time in the US than television, and the longitudinal effects the Internet will have on our society have only just begun to appear (2000, p. 221). The proliferation of mass communication technology such as television and the Internet has dramatically changed the way Americans live their lives. Statistics compiled by analysts tell us that annually, Americans watch 250 billion hours of television each year and the average number of hours a day per household
that the television is switched on is 6 hours and 47 minutes. We also know that each year, the average American child will spend about 900 hours in school and about 1,500 hours watching television. This intrusion of television into our lives is creating a consumerist culture in which by age 65, an American will have seen over 2 million commercials. The top 100 television advertisers spent over $15 billion selling products to the American people (Herr, 2001). Research on how television is affecting the American public has been going on for some time and leaders of the medical community have long voiced their opinions on the negative consequences television may have. Critics blame television for the nation’s violence epidemic, poor self-image, and the sedentary nature of American society. A child will see nearly 8,000 murders on television before they leave elementary school and that number reaches 40,000 by the age of 18 (Herr, 2001). Experts say that television has become an addiction among the American public, with many “high television” watchers expressing five symptoms of dependency upon television, which is two more than needed to classify something as clinical substance abuse (Herr, 2001). A survey in 1995 also blames television for the 4.7 million children found to be “severely overweight” in the US. This same group watches an average of 22 hours of television per week and consumes a high-calorie diet – experts found 200 junk food commercials within a four-hour period of Saturday morning cartoons (Herr, 2001). Children are not the only ones to suffer from the obesity epidemic in the US; adults who watch three hours or more of television a day are much more likely to be severely overweight than those who watch less than half an hour a day (Herr, 2001). According to Nielsen Media Research (2005), Americans are watching television today in record levels.

While television viewing rates have increased across the US, the number of households with Internet access has also risen dramatically, from 54.6% in 2001 to 61.5% in 2003, and continues to grow (US Department of Commerce, 2004, p. 5). Americans use their Internet connections to communicate via e-mail, play games, listen to music, watch television or movies, purchase goods, bank, and get information. The Internet has allowed Americans to continue their consumerist ways without having to leave their home. This is a trend that seems to be affecting young people the most; A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding Their Use of the Internet (US Department of Commerce, 2002, p. 42), says that “by the age of 10 young people are more likely to use the Internet than adults at any age beyond 25.” The Internet is increasingly being used in the classroom. Some 84% of children aged 5 to 9 use the Internet at home, school, or both (US Department of Commerce, 2002, p. 44). However, in spite of pervasive Internet use in the classroom, major usage gaps exist between different age, racial, and socio-economic status groups. The Internet is a wonderful tool for education due to the wealth of information it provides, but as with television, it is not without concerns among parents. Parents continue to be worried about the types of inappropriate or dangerous material their children may be exposed to through Internet use. Of
parents surveyed in A Nation Online (US Department of Commerce, 2002, p. 54), 46.9% indicated a concern about materials their children were being exposed to from the television and the Internet equally.

Doris A. Graber (2002) has found that African American households as well as Hispanic households are more reliant on television than are White families. However, she finds the greatest differences in how Americans use media between income levels: “High-income families, who usually are better educated than poor families, use print media more and television less than the rest of the population” (Graber, 2002, p. 202). However, Chadwick (2006, pp. 73-77) says that when explaining the digital divide in particular Internet usage, it is important to look at the variables of income, race, and education level as they are all strong indicators of the types of media consumed and the quality of the information being obtained. Chadwick (2006, p. 73) points out that it is important to note that demographic variables can be very closely related and these three in particular are strongly intercorrelated. Through an analysis of these variables from each study, income followed by education and then closely followed by race seems to be the most statistically significant variable when determining who has access to quality information and the Internet. However, Chadwick points out that these broad demographic variables do not necessarily explain why certain Americans are accessing the Internet and others are not. A study done by the University of Southern California indicates that those who access the Internet more often (typically younger, White, highly educated and upper income) use the Internet for a broad range of activities that shape their social, personal, and professional networks while expanding their knowledge, as opposed to those who access the Internet less often (who typically are in lower socio-economic groups), who do so mostly for entertainment (Chadwick, 2006, p. 75).

Television and the Internet: Important Sources of Political Socialization?

What role do the media play in shaping the identity of individuals? According to Huntemann and Morgan, media, particularly television, influence children’s “values, beliefs, dreams, and expectations” (2001, p. 311). Huntemann and Morgan (2001, p. 312) say that adolescence is the time the media play the largest role in helping to shape individuals’ identity. Studies show that media play a large role in shaping the identity of adolescents, who are searching for independence from family and society. A great deal of content analysis of television programs and commercials has been done and common findings report that media provide a quick way for children to learn what it means to be a boy or a girl (German and Lally, 2005). Despite progress in television in providing women with non-traditional roles, gender stereotypes still exist which are picked up in television use beginning in early childhood years. Huntemann and Morgan give as an example the use of
teen magazines to define young girls’ femininity (2001, p. 314). It is alarming to think that there is a lack of studies of media effects on the sexual behaviors of adolescents, but there is a large pool of analysis of television programming with sexual content. Further, Huntemann and Morgan (2001, p. 315) perceive that sexual attractiveness is critical and for the majority of people, the comparisons that this invites are not healthy. In the development of an identity within society, this can lead to isolation, self-rejection, and an obsession with body image among adolescents. Content analysis of television programming also reveals that “sex” in the media refers to an unmarried, heterosexual couple. Gay and lesbian teens are excluded completely from the perceived television audience (Huntemann and Morgan, 2001, pp. 315-316).

Media portrayals also affect the socialization of minority children. Walter Gerson (1966) explores this in his article “Mass Media Socialization: Negro–White Differences.” Gerson suggests that African American children are in fact more socialized by mass media than are White children. They may even be using media, in particular the television, to learn how to behave more like White people. Gerson believes that this behavior is only perpetuating social segregation, a poor self-image among African American children, and highlighting the differences between communities (Gerson, 1966, pp. 40-50). The portrayal of minorities has deep historical roots, but negative images of minorities are repeated and normalized by keeping certain groups invisible (Huntemann and Morgan, 2001, p. 316). Statistics published by the Common Sense Media Poll report that, of the characters shown on prime time television, 3% are Asian, 4% are Latino, and 16% are African American; the remaining 74% are White. Also, 19% of prime time television characters are non-human, while only 17% are women (Key Findings, 2003). Content analyses have shown that, typically, minorities are associated with crime, violence, and substance abuse and are rarely seen in interracial interactions, unless it is with an authority figure. Researchers have found that because of the negative portrayal of minorities, minority children who watch a lot of television have a poor self-concept and do not want to participate in society outside of their community. As a result of the distorted view of African Americans in the media, African American children often reject their non-White, non-European heritage (Huntemann and Morgan, 2001, p. 316). The negative portrayal of minorities has come under much criticism by minority group leaders, yet minorities still remain some of the most active consumers of media. One theory as to why this occurs is what Oscar Gandy calls the “social construction of risk” (Gandy, 2001, pp. 600-618). Using content analysis and surveys, Gandy concludes that the depiction of both minorities and women in the media leads them to believe that the world is a dangerous place. Both women and African Americans feel they are more at risk in society for some type of crime or prejudiced treatment than White males (Gandy, 2001, pp. 600-618).
Many African Americans see racial biases in American media as a long-term trend. Michael Ryan (1982, pp. 276-289) tries to determine how minorities choose their media in order to avoid what they see as an emphasis on bad news and a suppression of good news in urban, minority, and low-income neighborhoods. This unfair depiction of minorities causes a negative self-image and may lead to a rejection of American culture as a whole and, therefore, poor socialization of minority citizens. It is plausible that the way the television media depict gender roles, sexuality, violence, and minorities could be contributing to the loss of social capital in the US as television increasingly grows to be a major aspect of socialization in the lives of Americans (German and Lally, 2005). Many experts believe that media portrayals of minorities are responsible for race-oriented political activities in the US (German, 1994; Chaffee and German, 1998). German (1994, pp. 285-297) observed the evident policy shift away from minority civil rights toward different types of policy by the Reagan administration and which led the American population to agree that minority groups were no longer disadvantaged in society. Using a content analysis of major news networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS), German determined that minority groups’ inability to remain in the media spotlight has caused problems with race relations in the US and has led to the attitude that these groups are no longer disadvantaged (1994, pp. 285-297). In 1998, Chaffee and German carried out a content analysis of three major newspapers (the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune) to determine what types of coverage minority citizens are receiving. They determined that the small amount of news coverage given to minorities, especially Hispanic Americans, coupled with the negative subject matter of the majority of this coverage, has provided a base for extremely negative attitudes among Americans toward minority groups (1998, pp. 312-320). Further, Kellstedt (2000) determined that the quality of media relations with minority groups determines political policy dynamics of race relations. Typically, an emphasis on individuality leads to conservative racial policy and an emphasis on egalitarianism leads to more liberal racial policies (Kellstedt, 2000, pp. 245-260). Individuality is more often the favorably portrayed media role today.

The portrayal of families in the media has also developed the socialized attitude of American youth toward problem-solving. Often, quick solutions to conflict create a sense of immediate gratification in the eyes of children and distort their view of commitment to a relationship. According to Kubey and Donovan (2001, p. 331), “People have been conditioned to expect quick and easy solutions,” and this may be a key reason why many people are not prepared for the roles of parent and spouse. Content analysis of television programs by experts in psychology, communication, and sociology clearly indicates that television has a large effect on the education of children (German and Lally, 2005).

What follows is a profile of the American public and their use of television and the Internet: who has access, how much they are using it, and what they are
accessing. The increasing widespread use of television and the Internet by almost every American for both information and entertainment can help us to explain the decline in US face-to-face social connectedness.

**Media Use Patterns: A Profile of American Children**

What is important to note in Table 1 is that access to television has reached almost total saturation, with 99% of households having at least one television. Also, although questions about instant messaging programs were not asked in the Kaiser 1999 survey since it had not yet become popular, almost 60% of households surveyed in 2004 had an instant messaging program. Internet subscription has risen 27% between 1999 and 2004, with 74% of households surveyed having access in the home. Table 1 indicates that American youth are heavy media users.

*Table 1: In-home media availability in 2004 and 1999 (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005) *Indicates unavailable data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
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<td>2004 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cable/satellite television</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premium channel</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>47</td>
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<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant messaging program</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

When access is broken down by race and ethnicity there are some important trends to examine in Table 2. While 99% of all ethnicities own at least one television, African Americans have access to the most television sets, with 81% owning three or more, which is almost 10% more than Whites (73%) or Hispanics (72%). However, when looking at computer ownership, Blacks and Hispanics are 12% and 10% (respectively) behind Whites and when ownership of three or more computers is taken into account the percentage of Whites (15%) who own three or more computers nearly doubles compared to Blacks (9%). Perhaps the most important characteristic to take from Table 2 is the difference in access to the Internet across races. Eighty percent of Whites have access to the Internet at home, but only 61% of Blacks and 67% of Hispanics.
Table 2: In-home media availability by race and ethnicity (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)  
*Indicates unavailable data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>Black %</th>
<th>Hispanic %</th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>Black %</th>
<th>Hispanic %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cable/satellite television</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>78</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<td>Premium channel</td>
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<td>65</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
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<td>61</td>
<td>67</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instant messaging program</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>*</td>
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</table>

As indicated in Table 3, level of education, the greatest predictor of social class, is correlated with who has access to the Internet in the home. Sixty-eight percent of children of parents with a high school education have access to the Internet at home while 82% of children of parents who graduate from college (or more) have access.

Table 3: In-home media availability by parental education (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)  
*Indicates unavailable data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High school %</th>
<th>Some college %</th>
<th>College or more %</th>
<th>High school %</th>
<th>Some college %</th>
<th>College or more %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>75</td>
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<td>Computer</td>
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<td>Cable/satellite television</td>
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<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Premium channel</td>
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<td>58</td>
<td>57</td>
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<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant messaging program</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the most interesting changes in the data comes from the report of differences between boys’ and girls’ access to all multimedia categories, as seen in Table 4. In 1999, boys and girls reported usage of television, the Internet, and the computer in general at roughly the same levels give or take a few percentage points. However, in 2004, there are substantial differences in reports usage, with 8% more boys than girls having access to their own personal television. The difference between boys and girls remains about the same for access to a personal computer (9%) or Internet connection (7%).
Table 4: Gender and changes in ownership of selected personal media: 1999-2004 (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Boys %</th>
<th>Girls %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>Computer</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet connection</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of rules that parents have greatly affects what type of content children are exposed to and how much time they allot daily to each medium. In Table 5, it is very interesting to note that a very small number of the total sample of children in the Kaiser study report (2005) have rules about the amount of time spent watching television and even fewer have rules about what is being viewed. Across genders, children experience about the same number of rules. However, when it comes to looking at rules by race, more Whites (13%) and Hispanics (19%) have rules about television viewing than African Americans (8%). Also, children of parents with some college education or college education and beyond are twice as likely to have some types of rules dealing with watching television.

Table 5: Television rules: percentage of children with television-related rules (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rules about amount of time %</th>
<th>Rules about type of content %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total sample</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or more</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $35,000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000-$50,000</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $50,000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While rules associated with watching television apply to a very small percentage of the sample population, the proportions grow when talking about computers and the Internet (see Table 6). Parental filters are typically in low use across the board. The issue of protecting children from objectionable content on the
Internet first appeared in the early 1990s when the Internet began to increase in popularity. The Child Online Protection Act became law in 1998 and it made it a criminal act to allow children to view harmful material on the Internet. Objectionable sites were able to defend themselves by putting into place a system in order to verify a viewer’s age, such as credit card numbers or access codes.

New technology allows for different types of filters to be applied while accessing the Internet. The two main types of filters are “client side” and “server side.” Client side filters, the more flexible of the two, are software programs that are loaded onto individual computers. Many of these programs are designed specifically for children and work in conjunction with popular web browsers like Internet Explorer or Netscape. The two most popular “client side” filters are Net Nanny and Cyber Patrol (Lenhart, 2005). “Server side” filtering works in one of two ways: ISP (Internet Service Provider) filtering is when an Internet company allows clients to activate controls that block unacceptable sites on their account and web filtering is when clients hire an organization to filter their Internet access for them. Generally, web-based filtering requires a monthly subscription fee. Either method, ISP or web-based, requires Internet access to be filtered through a third party and is less flexible than “client side” filters (Lenhart, 2005). Most of the time, filters have to be paid for and we see that Hispanics are 10% behind Whites and 9% behind Blacks in the use of such filters. Also interesting to note in Table 6 is that for every category of rules, children of parents with a college education are 9% more likely to have rules than children of parents with a high school education.

Table 6: Computer rules: percentage of children with computer-related rules (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rules about amount of time %</th>
<th>Rules about what can be done on the computer %</th>
<th>Parents usually know which websites are visited %</th>
<th>Parental filters on computers %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or more</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $35,000</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000-$50,000</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $50,000</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One might argue that the freedom given American children translates into more democratic political orientations as adults than if the children were strictly supervised. But, it does appear that many children’s freedom of choice represents too much of an abdication of parental responsibility.

While new technology is emerging every day, children are not cutting back on television time to fit the newer mediums into their day (see Table 7). They view television just as much today as they did in 1999. However, it is interesting to note that African Americans watch television over an hour more each day than do White children.

Table 7: Television exposure by gender, race, parent education, and household income (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average daily television use (hours and minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>3:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>3:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4:05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3:23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>3:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>2:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or more</td>
<td>3:03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household income</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $35,000</td>
<td>3:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000-$50,000</td>
<td>2:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $50,000</td>
<td>3:08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3:05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While we can see that television usage has not gone down between 1999 and 2004, computer and Internet usage has increased significantly, as indicated by Table 8. Children are being exposed to the computer and Internet over a half an hour more in 2004 than they were in 1999.
One might argue that the freedom given American children translates into more democratic political orientations as adults than if the children were strictly supervised. But, it does appear that many children’s freedom of choice represents too much of an abdication of parental responsibility. While new technology is emerging every day, children are not cutting back on television time to fit the newer mediums into their day (see Table 7). They view television just as much today as they did in 1999. However, it is interesting to note that African Americans watch television over an hour more each day than do White children.

Table 7: Television exposure by gender, race, parent education, and household income (recreational) (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total computer use</th>
<th>Total Internet use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>0:06</td>
<td>0:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>1:04</td>
<td>0:53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1:02</td>
<td>0:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0:52</td>
<td>0:37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0:54</td>
<td>0:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>0:55</td>
<td>0:44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>0:57</td>
<td>0:44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or more</td>
<td>1:12</td>
<td>0:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Household Income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $35,000</td>
<td>0:55</td>
<td>0:43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35,000-$50,000</td>
<td>0:58</td>
<td>0:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over $50,000</td>
<td>1:11</td>
<td>0:56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>1:02</td>
<td>0:48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>0:27</td>
<td>0:11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When adding up the time children spend with different types of media (watching television, listening to music, watching movies, using the computer, and playing video games), we see that they spend over 7.5 hours using media every day (see Table 9). While some of this media use takes place during the school day, much of it occurs outside of school.

Table 9: Media time vs. time doing other activities (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time (hours and minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Watching television</td>
<td>3:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging out with parents</td>
<td>2:17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging out with friends</td>
<td>2:16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to music</td>
<td>1:44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercising, sports, etc.</td>
<td>1:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching movies/videos</td>
<td>1:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a computer</td>
<td>1:02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing hobbies, clubs, etc.</td>
<td>1:00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking on the telephone</td>
<td>0:53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing homework</td>
<td>0:50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing video games</td>
<td>0:49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>0:43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working at a job</td>
<td>0:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing chores</td>
<td>0:32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another important factor is that children who have their own television watch it almost an hour and a half longer each day than children who do not have their
own television set (see Table 10). Those who have their own computer use it an hour and twenty minutes more than children who do not have their own personal computer.

Table 10: Personal media vs. media exposure (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television</th>
<th>Computer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes 3:31</td>
<td>No 2:04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes 1:30</td>
<td>No 0:47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For many years now, child activists and pediatricians have been speaking about the negative effects that television content has on children’s self-esteem and here the Kaiser family foundation has asked some very interesting questions about how content a child is with their appearance in relation to the amount of exposure they have to television and the computer on a daily basis. It is quite obvious from Table 11 that the least content children watch television nearly a half an hour longer each day than those who are most content and they use the computer around 20 minutes longer each day.

Table 11: Media exposure in hours and minutes by contentedness (Source: Roberts, et al., 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low contentedness</th>
<th>Moderate contentedness</th>
<th>High contentedness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>3:25</td>
<td>3:02</td>
<td>2:57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>1:16</td>
<td>1:01</td>
<td>0:55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Media Use Patterns: A Profile of American Adults**

When the Internet became popular, it was said that it could save the ever-increasing levels of apathy among the American public toward politics. However, according to Chadwick (2006, p. 25), in the early years of the Internet, it was the conventional wisdom that those who were looking for political information on the Internet were those citizens who were already active. The 2004 presidential elections and the use of blogs and other types of what is becoming known as e-politics are certain to have long-term effects and new trends are sure to appear (Chadwick, 2006, p. 26).

Table 12 provides a profile of who uses the Internet in the US. It can be seen that many of the lower socio-economic groups use the Internet in the lowest numbers, creating what has been described as a digital divide between the haves and the have-nots in American society; and the gap between people with less than a high school education and those who have a college degree (or more) is more than 50%. It is quite evident from past research that education is one of the greatest predictors of social class. Thus, we can also see the differences in the degree of access to the Internet according to income, race, and age. While lower socio-economic groups have a lesser degree of access to the Internet, television has
saturated the market, with 99% of households owning a television. Table 13 is from a Nielsen Media Research News Release in 2005 entitled “Americans Watch TV at Record Levels.” Television consumption is increasing in the face of increased Internet use.

Table 12: Demographics of US Internet users 2004 (Source: Chadwick, 2006, p. 73)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Percentage Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-49</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 +</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Latino</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American, non-Latino</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $30,000 per year</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-$50,000</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000-$75,000</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $75,000</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College +</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Average hours/minutes of television consumption per day by broadcast year (Source: Nielsen Media Research, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broadcast year</th>
<th>Average hours/ minutes per day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>8:11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>8:01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>7:55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>7:42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>7:39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>7:31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>7:24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>7:15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14 shows the digital divide using several different databases. While the Kent State figures are somewhat different from the other studies, Chadwick (2006,
p. 74) points out that Kent State used some controls that actually make them more accurate. However, the figures seem to be in agreement across all of the studies. They show that education and income seem to be the greatest indicators of who is accessing the Internet. Education and income are closely followed by age and race. This leads to the question, what types of activities are Americans using the Internet for?

Table 14: The access divide in the USA: a survey of surveys (Source: Chadwick, 2006, p. 74)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internet access</th>
<th>Department of Commerce/NTIA, September 2001</th>
<th>Pew, May 2002</th>
<th>Kent State Survey, July 2001</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education gap (high school diploma vs. college education)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income gap (below vs. above $30,000 a year)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age gap (B: 18-24 vs. over 50; C: 18-29 vs. 50-64; D: average 28 vs. average 61)</td>
<td>28 B</td>
<td>22 C</td>
<td>24 D</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race gap (African American vs. White)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity gap (Latino vs. White)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NITIA) and the Economics and Statistics Administration (ESA) of the US Department of Commerce use the US Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey in A Nation Online (US Department of Commerce, 2002) and an update focusing on broadband technology in 2004 (US Department of Commerce, 2004). It is one of the most comprehensive reports on how Americans are using the Internet. As indicated in Figure 1, Americans who have access to the Internet use it for a variety of reasons. Of those who use the Internet, over 60% use it to find out the news, weather, or sports information, even more use it for some type of product search (i.e., online shopping), but the largest category (84%) use it for e-mail. A poll done by the Pew Research Center in 1998 shows what Americans are interested in when they watch the news – particularly the local news.
Figure 1: Online activities, ages 15+ (Source: US Department of Commerce, 2002)

So, of the small percentage of Americans who get their news in some way, the largest interest is crime and the second largest interest is in health and community. It is important to note in Table 15 that local government and domestic policy are about 11 and 15 percentage points behind community. Americans have more of an interest in their immediate community than in local or national government.

Table 15: General news interest, June 8, 1998 (Source: Pew Research Center, 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% who follow very closely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and technology</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic politics/policy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and finance</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International affairs</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer news</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and the arts</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, overall news viewing has declined steadily since a May 1993 benchmark. Table 16 shows a trend among Americans who say they regularly watch the nightly news. As indicated by Table 16, the number of Americans who regularly watch nightly news on the main networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) has declined from 60% to 38% in a time period of only five years. While network news viewing among Americans has seen a sharp decline, cable news stations such as CNN enjoyed a rise in viewing numbers until 1998, when the percentage of Americans who watched cable news plunged to 23%, lower than the percentages for any other year. However, it is interesting to note that while the number of Americans who never follow the news in nightly bulletins is rather low, Table 17 indicates that the percentages of Americans who never follow cable news are in many cases higher than for those who regularly watch.

**Table 16: Nightly network news viewing (Source: Pew Research Center, 1998)**

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly ever</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 17: Cable news network viewing (Source: Pew Research Center, 1998)**

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly ever</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>*</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the “Cable news network viewing” Pew report (Table 17) suggests, the decline in viewing within the news viewing segment of the American population can be compared to a newer way to access news – the online newspaper. This new medium is especially in evidence among the young and those who are in what Pew terms the “working years” (i.e., ages 30 to 49). Twenty-three percent of the population surveyed by the Pew Research Center report getting their news online every day. Those figures are higher in the 30 to 39 and the 40 to 49 age groups, where the percentages move to 33% and 27% respectively, and rapidly decline to only 7% for the 70+ age group. The authors predict that new generations will produce entirely different patterns, with the elderly being even more involved in the future with electronic news gathering compared to younger age categories since they are the heaviest newspaper consumers today.
In Table 18, it is interesting to note that the audiences who watch nightly news, morning shows, cable news, sports, and weather, and who use the Internet for news all possess different demographic characteristics in American society; they have different interests that are fulfilled by the type of news medium they choose. While Americans today are clearly not as interested in community events and government politics as the generations before them, they also claim that one more aspect of their lives has disintegrated with their increased television and Internet use: “The Internet could be the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities even more than did automobiles and television before it,” says Dr. Norman Nie of the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society (SIQSS Press Release, 2000). People report that they feel their conversations on the telephone and in person have been reduced due to increased levels of Internet use. As can be seen from Figure 2, more than a quarter of survey participants claim that they are spending less time on the telephone with family and friends due to the Internet.

Table 18: The growing trend of online newspapers (Source: Pew Research Center, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main source</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>18-29</th>
<th>30-39</th>
<th>40-49</th>
<th>50-59</th>
<th>60-69</th>
<th>70+</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get news online everyday</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analysis and Conclusions**

Television and the Internet are increasingly suspected to have a profound effect on the development of identity and the depletion of social capital in American society. Even though the Federal Communications Commission has set guidelines for television through the Children’s Television Act of 1990 and the Telecommunications Act of 1996, it lacks the power to truly enforce these guidelines. However, there is a lack of research on whether the favorite and often provocative television shows and websites of Americans really do have negative effects on children’s socialization. Many experts believe that television and the Internet are strong agents of socialization, especially citing relationships between violent or sexual content on television and violent behavior or sexual promiscuity in individuals; however, there is disagreement as to what should be done. Under the leadership of Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions reviewed a bill known as the Children and Media Research Advancement Act or CAMRA (see Lieberman, et al., 2004). This bill, which never became law, called for the National Academy of Science to work with the Institute of Medicine
to explore the cognitive, physical, and socio-behavioral effects of media on childhood socialization, and for $90 million to be appropriated. The effect of long-term television and Internet use by Americans is increasingly becoming an issue within American politics, particularly with the loss of social capital in the US. In the next few years, beginning with the CAMRA Act, experts in many fields should need to begin to do more in-depth research on how the explicit themes of television and its consumerist undertones affect the behaviors and opinions of US citizens. As of now, all we can examine is who has access, what are they accessing, and how much time they are spending accessing these media (German and Lally, 2005). Researchers also need to seek answers to the question of how television and the Internet affect the physical health of Americans, which the CAMRA Act calls for. Perhaps, when the research is done and Congress knows how television and the Internet are affecting the socialization of Americans, we can use these media to create a more active political culture.

![Graph](image.png)

**Figure 2: Internet users spend less time in social activities (Source: Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, 2000)**

The Internet is increasingly being used by children and adults in the United States. However, there are dramatic differences in accessibility in the home between higher and lower socio-economic status groups and between racial groups. Hence, the democratization opportunities of free information for all are compromised by the huge digital gap between those who have computers (Asian and
White racial groups and those with high incomes and education) and those who do not (African American, Hispanic, poorly educated, and low-income populations). Many scholars hoped that the Internet would open up the political process and be a check on the influence of big money, and afford poorer groups political access to many people. So far, as the data in this article imply, lower-income, poorly educated, and minority groups still do not have access to this outlet to voice their opinions and gain political ground (Purvis, 2001, p. 327). Congress has begun to use the Internet as a way of communicating with constituents and we are beginning (in particular with the 2000 and 2004 elections) to see a new type of campaigning that may lead to more grass-roots efforts. But the results of this type of campaigning remain to be seen (Purvis, 2001, p. 309). Furthermore, as with television, there are, in the case of the Internet, no studies that actually analyze the social and political development of children and adults resulting from Internet use. It is interesting that the social/political sciences too often ignore these media and often forget the socialization process itself. The genesis of adult behavior begins early in life and these electronic media are increasingly present in children’s lives (German and Lally, 2005). However, some studies conclude that the enormous time spent by individual Americans watching television and accessing the Internet has led to a cutback in the time they spend in face-to-face contact with other people (SIQSS, 2000). The dramatic differences we see between income, educational level, and race contribute to social and information gaps in our society. In conclusion, as the Internet reaches the market saturation levels that television has reached and Americans become even more consumed by this media trend, social capital as we have known it may continue to disintegrate. A new kind of individualized, virtual connectedness will evolve. Can this be good for what is left of the democracy which de Tocqueville saw in the 1830s?

References


Chapter 6
Participation Friendliness of Political Websites

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Abstract
This chapter focuses on the quality assessment of political websites. It introduces a special coding scheme which enables one to evaluate and compare the quality of websites in the political sphere. These websites include party and public administration websites and personal websites of political leaders and administrators, as well as sites from non-governmental social and political organizations. Maybe even more important is that the criteria of the coding scheme may further the building of a qualitatively good political site in terms of “participation friendliness.”

Introduction
Websites form a new and additional political communication channel in a virtual and worldwide environment, which introduces new features into relations between writing and reading, between verbal and visual media. This creates a new model of political communication that has a potential to improve existing forms of political participation as well as to introduce new forms for those who are inclined to benefit from digitalization.

As we all know, creating a successful website is not easy. This is an obvious conclusion when looking at sites that are difficult to navigate, find information from, or interact with. As users, we are struggling with poorly designed and implemented sites. As researchers, we need to tackle the problem in a new way. It is important to understand that it is not enough to make a website functional, but the site should also be usable, appealing, compelling and engaging from a user’s point of view. The “art” of creating engaging websites needs new interdisciplinary approaches, presenting perspectives from communication studies, film and media analysis, graphic design, architecture, development of digital technologies and computer science, etc., as well as a psychological understanding of the human being as an emotive, sensuous, cultural, intellectual and social being (Neuner and De Landtsheer, 2005).

This chapter will first in a general part, introduce e-politics, the use of the Internet as a means of communication in politics. It will discuss the debate between believers and non-believers in e-politics. Can we consider the Internet as a new means of more equal communication? This chapter will detail the role of political websites and e-campaigning and give an overview of research results.

The chapter will then introduce, more specifically, a method for assessing the quality of political websites or websites in the public sphere. This method is entitled “the participation-friendliness index for political websites” (De Landtsheer,
Krasnoboka, and Neuner, 2007). A final section will explain that the coding scheme is based upon political participation theory. The method was, until now, used to evaluate websites in the European Union countries, in the United States, and in South Africa. Most of the websites were analyzed at the event of political elections. Besides, the coding scheme was applied to governmental sites and sites by non-governmental (social) organizations, or even by terrorists, in order to get an insight in their communication strategies.

General Part

Within the last decennia, the Internet has evolved from the pale copy of the traditional media to the full-scale virtual public sphere, the meeting place of different actors. The world of politics could not stay away from the options offered by the Internet. The new prospects of digital information and communication did not pass unnoticed by political spin doctors. From this point of view, the Internet provides cheap but effective forms of infotainment, which, while bypassing the traditional filters of mainstream mass media, connect political actors directly with their voters. However, as different research projects demonstrate, despite the obvious advantages that the Internet communication offers for political actors, not all politicians and political parties have realized and acknowledged the importance of having an online presence.

E-politics

While the Internet has become a standard means of information and communication in advanced nations, the rest of the world lags far behind. Similar to challenges in other areas of social, economic, and political development, the African continent, for instance, continues to be the least affected by technological innovation. The North-South divide, reinforced in recent years by the “digital divide,” is primarily associated with Africa’s challenges. Even a continent as digitally challenged as Africa is not, however, completely homogeneous. Levels of social development are relatively low compared to more advanced world nations, but there are significant and consistent differences across the continent. As in many other areas of societal development, both the Northern African countries and South Africa are pioneering Internet use on the African continent.

The role of the Internet in political and social affairs is hotly debated in the literature. Scientific views vary from “cyber optimists” to “cyber pessimists.” In its pure, uncontrolled form, the Internet has all chances to develop into the proper public sphere (Bennett, 2003), where variety of ideas and comments can be relatively easily and quickly exchanged throughout the world, bypassing the channels of more traditional mass communication. This leads to “one-to-one,” “one-to-many,” and “many-to-many” types of communication, freed from any form of control, geographical, or time barriers.
Norris (2001) distinguishes two forms of Internet communication. The “top-down” communication enables practically unlimited stream of information from online actors. This form of Internet communication leads to the enrichment of the public with socially and politically relevant information and facts, which in its turn leads to the emergence of “bottom-up” communication, including exchange of ideas, inauguration of debates, and mobilization of public opinion.

The Internet is a cheap means of communication understood in relative but not absolute terms of the efficiency of the message dissemination. The price of the global message dissemination via more traditional channels considerably exceeds the price of the digital channel. Such convenient economic aspect of the Internet communication attracts ever growing numbers of social and political actors willing to spread their message as wide as possible. Bennett (2003) also stresses the importance of Internet communication for “global activism.” The ever growing number of world-wide networks makes possible the phenomenon of “global thinking.”

Such an often utopian vision of virtual communication is particularly attractive for the marginal and marginalized organizations and actors who embrace the Internet’s possibilities of anonymity and breadth of their message circulation despite limited financial resources. So, in the early 1990s, the Zapatista rebels in Mexico have used the Internet to mobilize their supporters. During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the opposition to the Milosevic regime received an additional boost and support through the Internet-based radio station. Emerging African organizations for women’s wellbeing use the chance to establish Internet contact with similar organizations worldwide. For some disappearing aboriginal communities, such as the Cherokee Indians in the US, the Internet has become the essential tool to preserve and protect their cultural identity (Arnold and Plymire, 2000). And in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, the Internet helped to bring some of the power back to the citizens.

Although the Internet looks like the world of equal chances in terms of variety of opinions and possibilities for mobilization, there is no equality in terms of Internet access or intellectual and technical skills connected with Internet use. In this respect, the Internet reinforces the chances of those with necessary skills and equipment to create an e-fluent elite (Accone, 2002). Thus, only this elite can really enjoy the advantages of the new digital medium, while less fortunate actors are only further marginalized. Further widening of the gap between material and intellectual possibilities of different groups, now on the basis of Internet access, has received the name of digital divide.

The arguments of cyber optimists and cyber pessimists are also heard on the digital landscape. Optimists see in the Internet the potential for further democratic development which can bring an uncensored transnational public sphere by the means of equal access to the Internet technologies. In their turn, pessimists refer to
the digital divide theory, stressing the unequal chances based on race, gender, and socio-economic status.

**Believers versus Non-believers**

There is no consensus in the literature for the relevance and significance of political websites. While practically all authors agree on the role political websites may potentially play in their parties’ or group’s propaganda, rationality of such involvement and its added value are often questioned.

**Believers: Advantages of the Political Internet Compared to Traditional Media**

In their analysis of the political websites in New Zealand, Conway and Dorner (2004) list five ways in which, according to the authors, political parties may improve their communication by the means of the Internet and to reach greater mobilization effects than traditional media may have. They talk about increased volume of the information transmission; speed of intercommunication; diversity of technoformats (audio, video, text); multidirectionality of communication and information flows; and decentralization of control.

**Norris (2001)** distinguishes top-down and bottom-up (vide supra) communication. The author stresses that the potential advantage of the Internet as a communication medium in comparison with traditional media is the free spreading of different types of information. This can combine posting the full text of the governmental report next to the summaries of audio and video materials from press conferences and debates. The spreading of information occurs directly and simultaneously and is available to the broader Internet public in an efficient, equal, and cheap way. Next to such examples of top-down communication, political parties can initiate additional bottom-up communication exchanges between citizens or interest groups on one side and the politicians and governmental officials on the other side. Many political websites also employ interactive tools such as chat rooms and feedback forms as well as comments pages.

These and other advantages are particularly pronounced in smaller parties which previously did have proper means for political communication due to the costs involved. Bimber (1998) stresses the bridging of the financial gap between groups and parties as one of the most important outcomes of Internet communication. The Internet offers easier ways to mobilize funds and votes for those political groups which previously were unable to enjoy such mobilization through more traditional means of communication. The principle that smaller parties (left
out by the traditional media) acquire via the Internet a cheap platform for spreading their political message and, in this way, get more equal chances with bigger parties, has received the name of “leveling of the playing field” (Norris, 2003; Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003; Gibson, et al., 2003). This fact can be seen as an explanation why smaller parties are often more enthusiastic about the potential offered by digital political communication compared to bigger parties.

Non-believers: No Visible Advantages of the Internet Compared to Traditional Media

According to Coleman (1999), “The e-campaigning hype has far exceeded any real political effects.” Compared to the generally accepted professional standards of Internet design, the majority of political websites remains considerably behind (Norris, 2003). This is particularly noticeable in terms of user-friendliness and interactive possibilities: many sites lack proper search options, site maps, or graphic illustrations. Often, official information is presented in a very dry, formal, and technical style, which requires a certain degree of prior knowledge and acquaintance with official procedures. Readability of online texts often becomes yet another challenge for regular citizens due to the usage of the simple techniques of “copy-paste” of official documents directly onto websites without any elementary adjustment, technical and cognitive alike. In many cases, the informative function of the website (top-down communication) exceeds its interactive (bottom-up) possibilities.

Norris (2003) concludes that while the Internet possesses a variety of possibilities, it should be seen rather as an addition to and not as a replacement of more traditional forms of political communication. Also, while the advantages of Internet communication before the more traditional means promoted by the “believers” are acknowledged, not all of them are realized in practice. Websites and emails are additional ways in which political actors may reach citizens, not as substitutes for more traditional ways of engagement. One of the possible explanations here is that citizens have to be stimulated in the first place to start using the Internet for political reasons (Hansen, et al., 2005). This means, among other things, that the government, the administration, political parties, and NGOs need to promote their websites first via conventional offline communication channels.

Also the argument about “leveling the playing field” has been critically approached by many authors (Margolis, et al., 1997; Gibson, Nixon, and Ward, 2003; Gibson, Rommele, and Ward, 2003). There are no signs of more even balance between different parties and interests online than what exists offline. Discrepancies and inequalities between political actors are now reflected online. Politics on the Internet is politics as usual (Margolis and Resnick, 2000), bigger parties are more present online than smaller ones (Norris, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2000). Big parties, which previously reached big numbers of voters via
traditional means of communication, now are able to reach bigger numbers of voters online as well (Bimber, 1998). Websites of big political parties are also richer, content-wise and visually, than the websites of smaller parties (Hansen, et al., 2005) because big parties have more resources to recruit the personnel to update and design their websites. Richer parties are also capable of greater offline promotion of their websites. In other words, the arrival of the Internet does not break down financial and institutional barriers. Despite this fact, there are still a certain number of smaller parties (primarily green and left parties) that succeeded in breaking through the existing pattern, launching successful political websites. Different empirical analyses demonstrated that precisely such parties have the most user-friendly and interactive websites (Gibson and Ward, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002; Voerman and Ward, 2000; Ward, et al., 2003; De Landtsheer, et al., 2004; De Landtsheer, et al., 2001).

Research Results

Based on the previous empirical analysis of political websites in various countries, we can establish a number of empirical findings. These include that big political parties are more inclined to be present online, that newer parties will have a greater online presence, and that ideology also plays some role (Norris, 2001; Gibson, et al., 2003; Ward, et al., 2003; Margolis, et al., 1997; De Landtsheer, et al., 2005; Cuevas, 2004).

Despite the great enthusiasm that smaller parties have shown to the arrival of the new medium, it is the bigger parties which researchers find present online (Norris, 2001). There are hardly many signs of the “leveling of the playing field” (Gibson and Ward, 2001 and 2002). More recently, De Landtsheer, et al. (2001 and 2004) confirm this hypothesis in the study of the last European elections, and Cuevas (2004) finds support for the same claim in her analysis of the Filipino political websites. This fosters the conclusion that bigger political parties have more and better chances to be present online. The data from the 2001 UK elections show that bigger parties are able to invest more time and resources for maintaining their websites, often offering extra search and fundraising options (Ward, et al., 2003). Similar results come out of the studies of the 1998 and 2000 US election campaigns (Gibson, et al., 2003): websites of bigger parties are more functional and offer extra options in comparison with smaller parties. Also Norris (2001) in her analysis of 399 websites concludes that smaller parties offer less content and often lack interactive options. De Landtsheer, et al. (2001 and 2004) registered a strong correlation between the size of political parties and participation-friendliness of their websites. Similarly, Carlson and Kjupsund (2001) suggest that websites of smaller parties in the 1999 Finnish elections had lower quality compared to the websites of bigger parties. Furthermore, Conway and Dorner (2004) argue that bigger parties in New Zealand use their websites and online presence more effectively and efficiently. De Landtsheer, et al. (2004 and 2007) reported similar
results in their study of Belgian websites, stating that overall quality of smaller parties’ websites is lower than that of bigger parties.

Gibson and McAllister (2005) suggest that political groups which stress the importance of political participation and decentralization of powers and who rely on support of the more educated middle class are more inclined to engage in online campaigning. In another analysis of the 2000 US presidential elections, it was discovered that the websites related to the Democratic party had scored better than those related to the Republican party (De Landtsheer, et al., 2001). The Democrats put efforts into interactive features of their websites, while the Republicans use the Internet primarily for self-presentation and public relations. As far as the study of the Belgian political websites is concerned, the ecologist and leftist parties score better than others. The later study, however, shows that the differences between left and other parties are diminishing, with right-wing and conservative parties rapidly catching up.

**Websites in Political Campaigning**

Only ten years ago, the use of the Internet in a political campaign was seen as a strange and questionable innovation. Today, practically no important political campaign in Western societies is organized without the development of a suitable Internet strategy. Politicians, media, and civic groups employ diverse online means to present, defend, and promote their ideas and choices. Some of them dare to use highly interactive applications, others prefer to stick to the safe haven of (merely) information spreading. Election campaigns in particular have seen a dramatic increase in Internet use. Today, practically any politician or political party that competes in elections runs at least one political website. Additionally, support and partisan groups launch their own online presence. In their turn, media organizations and think tanks develop expert websites, where visitors may not only find sufficient analytical material and compare candidates’ programs, but even determine their own political preferences in case they are not sure which candidate may represent their interest in the best possible way. Alongside more “traditional” forms of online presence (such as websites and forums), newer Internet applications such as YouTube and LiveJournals are widely used for political ends.

Despite the rapid innovation of the Internet space, websites continue to be the major means of political representation online. They contain the fullest information on the parties, groups, and candidates who run in elections. Websites are directly controlled by the political actors themselves so that the (in)famous complaints about media framing and agenda setting are no longer a challenge in the case of Internet communication.

American political life has seen the most profound impact of the Internet on its conduct. The Internet has become not only the additional communicative tool for well-known candidates but also an irreplaceable means for the lesser known candidates to spread their message and to gain voters’ support. In particular, the
Internet has become an important fundraising tool. In Europe, use of the Internet for political purposes is less pronounced and intense. Nevertheless, also here the Internet plays an ever-growing role in political and, particularly, in election campaigns.

The first prominent use of the Internet by political parties and candidates had been launched during the 1996 presidential election campaign in the United States. Many political parties lacked any sound strategy for the effective use of the Internet (Selnow, 1998; Roper, 1998). Often, parties had to begin using the Internet simply so they would not look outdated. However, the lack of a clear web strategy had become the important characteristic of political websites of the first generation. In many cases, the material which could be found then on the political websites was “copied and pasted” from the newsletters and party papers, which were first and foremost available offline. In a 2005 study of Danish websites, Hansen, et al. (2005) refer to those first-generation websites as the “telephone book generation” because the majority of websites primarily contained addresses and telephone numbers of party bureaus as well as old and new party programs and press releases.

Websites of the second, “information-broadcasting generation” (Hansen, et al., 2005), are characterized by the development of specific web strategies which differed from the general campaign strategies. The primary goal was to inform potential voters on different aspects of party politics, while there was no real trust yet in the advantages of digital communication as such. Where first-generation websites were mainly known for providing administrative information (and that primarily for the party members), second-generation websites were more focused on voters and providing them with relevant information. Thus, at that stage, the Internet began to be seen as a new way to supply information. Although at that stage, a separate, specific Internet strategy emerged (different from the general campaign strategy), the message sent through the digital channel remained unchanged compared to that sent through other communication channels.

The online campaign of Howard Dean for the nomination as the Democratic presidential candidate in the 2002 US elections became a catalyst for the emergence of third-generation websites. This new type of website became known for its three major goals: to convince instead of simply to inform voters, to boost fundraising, and to mobilize supporters. Such proactive functioning of the websites was named the “integrated image generation” (Hansen, et al., 2005). Online donations, personalized blogs of candidates, coordination of online communication, and a political activism events calendar are only a few attributes of this new generation of websites.

**Methodology Part**

Several attempts have been made to evaluate the quality of political websites. Qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to investigate how efficiently and appropriately politicians, parties, and candidates filled their sites with content.
(Davis, 1999; Klinenberg and Perrin, 2000; Norris, 2003; Cullen and Houghton, 2000). Some studies focused on counting certain features (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Gibson and Ward, 1998; LaPorte, et al., 2000; West, 2001; Foot and Schneider, 2002; Schneider and Foot, 2002; Rosenstiel, et al., 2004) while others also included the evaluation of quality (Davis, 1999; D’Alessio, 1997). Even though the analysis of party and campaign websites is not novel, only a few studies offer a comparative perspective. Before detailing the participation-friendliness coding scheme, we will discuss the theory on which the scheme is built.

**Political Participation and Political Websites**

Political participation can be seen as any kind of (political) communication processes to try to influence the selection of governmental personnel and the actions they take (Verba and Nie, 1972). Scholars tried to systemize the possible forms of political participation (Milbrath, 1965). For the purpose of our assessment scheme, we focus on a categorization regarding content. Building on Hagen (1997), we distinguish four main forms of political participation:

1. Active information seeking. Diverse information about the political processes and the political actors is a base for opinion formation and activity in political life.

2. Active political discussion. Discussion between citizens and between citizens and institutions is another important act of political participation. According to Etzioni (2003) a reasoned, informed, and broadly shared position requires dialoguing. In order to influence the selection and actions of representatives, one has to build an opinion first.

3. Voting. As the most direct activity to select governmental personnel, voting is the third dimension of political participation and, in the views of scholars, the central one. In order to deepen public actions, citizens must at least participate in the choice of their public officials. In this context, political parties function as important participation channels for citizens. Parties decide about the available candidates to vote for and formulate the “supports” and “demands” of citizens as an input into the political system (Milbrath, 1965).

4. Political activity. As any activity that is directed at securing or opposing any change in the law or in the policy or decisions of central governmental or local authorities (whether inside the country or abroad), political activity is the fourth dimension. Conventional and unconventional activities include volunteering in campaign work, participating in a community forum, demonstrating, or even mobilizing fellow citizens (Barnes and Kaase, 1979).

Especially in the context of the European elections (where politics seems to be removed from citizens), political websites can extend and enhance these forms of political participation. The next part of this chapter presents a short, exemplary
sketch of possibilities for improving citizens’ participation with the help of the Internet.

**Political Websites**

Given the four types of citizens’ political participation, how can a political website’s design and content enhance these activities from a citizen’s perspective? In order to address the question, we try to identify the Internet’s potential to support and improve these four dimensions of citizens' political participation. Regarding the four categories of political participation, we argue that websites should be informative, interactive, user-friendly, and aesthetically stimulating.

The “information” quality of websites relates to information seeking by citizens. The Internet enables an information transfer with a much higher volume and speed compared to traditional mass media (Neuner and De Landtsheer, 2005). The often-claimed lack of transparency and access to the traditional media channels by citizens and minor political actors can be compensated by information provision and exchange via websites (Mambrey, et al., 1999). The new possibilities for combined text, audio, images, and hyperlinks enable new styles of multi-media messages, which can enrich and stimulate communication processes. The political parties, therefore, are expected to offer political information in an adequate format on their websites (e.g., background information downloadable as a pdf-file, downloadable speeches, linking important information).

The “interactive” quality of websites concerns the political discussion function. Websites should support citizens for information activation and documentation (e.g., download papers and forms). Moreover, they should enable citizens to directly communicate with the candidates and parties in a reciprocal way or even enable citizens to mobilize other citizens. The interactive features of the Internet enable two-way communication (synchronous or asynchronous and in horizontal and lateral directions) between fellow online citizens, interest groups, political parties, candidates, and so on. These features of websites make interaction possible between users and a website interface (e.g., navigation, download). A user has more control since the limitations of time and space and the borders between authors and receivers of information are blurring (Neuner and De Landtsheer, 2005). Online, citizens can discuss and reflect their viewpoints, everybody can become an editor or a publisher, and community connections (e.g., online forums) can be fostered. Websites can (online) expand and optimize the existing channels of communication (e.g., political parties, mass media, and public sphere).

“User-friendliness” of websites relates to the voting dimension of political participation. The term “user-friendliness” embraces the extent to which a website supports its users in completing their tasks efficiently, effectively, and satisfactorily (Nielsen, 2000). Citizens will be encouraged to use political websites if they are user-friendly. While newspapers and electronic mass media tend to provide mostly the coverage of the major candidates and the hottest issues, websites can help to
compensate for the deficits. Appropriate information and communication services (beyond the 30-second advertisements, sound bites, and horse race campaign coverage) can engage voters by providing more substance. In addition, candidates can contact the electorate personally via e-mail or discussion forums and try to convince or mobilize them. In this way, the gap between politicians and their electorate could be narrowed. A cleverly constructed website can target many audiences and even attract new ones, especially young people (Norris, 2001).

The “aesthetics” applied to websites relates to the dimension of political activity. The aesthetic quality of a website is directly connected to its persuasive and mobilizing functions that are based on the emotional appeal of the site. Our definition of “aesthetics” embraces the entire perception of a website by the citizen users. It addresses the arrangement and style of written words, elements of visual communication (e.g., pictures, empty space, body language), as well as the use of sound with which a website invites and challenges a user to follow its lead. It refers to the mediated tone and mood of a website’s content (Schirmacher, 1999). There are many ways to become politically active. For a brief overview, people can join a range of direct (e.g., petition for a referendum) and indirect (party membership, volunteer party work, etc.) conventional forms, as well as direct (e.g., participating in actions of social movements, NGOs) and indirect (participation at citizen forums and networks) unconventional forms of political activities (Kaase and Marsh, 1979; Norris, 2003). It is often claimed that the growing popularity of unconventional “grassroots” forms of political activities exists due to an increasingly perceived “weakness” of citizens against the distanced and alienated apparatus of the state (including political parties) (Norris, 2003). Against such a background, websites can function as a “bridge” (a direct and interactive communication channel) between the MPs, party officials, candidates, and citizens. Moreover, issues can be launched by intellectuals or by advocates with limited resources and be taken up by journalists or associations off- and online. Issues, subsequently, can even turn into social movements or into new subculture; and they can finally reach the mass media and appear on the political agenda.

Participation-friendliness Scheme

The coding scheme we present here was developed and primarily applied in the comparative study of political websites in Eastern and Western Europe (De Landtsheer, et al., 2005). The term “participation-friendliness” emphasizes how the design and the content of a website can enhance, motivate, and encourage citizens to become active participants in the political communication processes on- and offline.

We have developed the criteria which take into account a wide range of factors supposedly crucial in this context. The criteria are based on the latest literature (books, case studies, articles, and web design guidelines) from the different fields of study: political science, educational and information science, communication
and commercial studies, graphic design, and psychology. The coding scheme is easily adaptable for the study of other public actors’ websites, such as social movements, candidates, governments, interest groups, media organizations, etc.

Participation-friendliness is the major evaluation parameter of the coding scheme. It is based on the assumption that a political website can become an important information, communication, and participatory tool in election campaigns and other forms of politicians-citizens interactions only if it satisfies certain criteria. The coding scheme includes the four main categories: information, interactivity, user-friendliness, and aesthetics (for a detailed description of all categories, see Appendix 1).

Information pays attention to the quality and type of information. Interactivity deals with the possibilities offered to be an active citizen, contrasted to an unengaged recipient of information. Building on Rafaeli (1988), we consider interactivity as not just a technological feature, but also as a communication concept by itself. User-friendliness refers to the ease with which users can navigate the site and find information and services. Even if the Internet technologies carry a high potential to foster citizen’s participation possibilities in impressive new ways, scientists should not forget that it is still an interaction between humans and a machine. And the website interface as a mediator of this interaction plays a significant role (Norman, 2002; Dillon, 2000; Schneiderman, 1998). Since for many citizens, the computer is still a confusing or even frightening tool, it is important while assessing the participation-friendliness of political websites to consider how citizens will best interact with the website interface. Theories and research from interface design, human-computer interaction, and cognitive science provide a valuable contribution for improving political website interfaces concerning their potential to foster citizens’ engagement. Aesthetics addresses the arrangement and style of written words and visual elements with which the medium invites and challenges a user to follow its lead.

Measurement of Criteria

From a great range of possible conditions of political and electoral success of websites, we have chosen information, interactivity, user-friendliness, and aesthetics as the key characteristics of websites’ participation-friendliness. Each main category includes five subcategories. We give each subcategory a weight factor, according to its estimated power to support civic engagement. Within each category, a maximum of four points are given to each of the subcategories (0 = not present, 1 = scanty presence, 2 = average presence, 3 = above-average presence, 4 = very good presence). These points are multiplied with the corresponding weight-factors. Their sum gives points for each category. A website can score a maximum of 60 points per category, which in total gives a maximum of 240 points for the index of Participation Friendliness. The more points a website gets, the more participation-friendly it is assessed (see Table 1 for the coding scheme). For better
comparison, we have also given “low-average-high” labels for these points (see Table 2).

**Table 1: Assessment scheme for participation-friendliness of political websites**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Weight Factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 self-representation and public relations</td>
<td>(value 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 external information</td>
<td>(value 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 general ‘boulevard’ information</td>
<td>(value 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 political information for citizens</td>
<td>(value 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 political background information</td>
<td>(value 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interactivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 read-only-service</td>
<td>(value 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 read-and-just-write-service</td>
<td>(value 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 electronic correspondence</td>
<td>(value 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 forums/discussion groups/virtual communities</td>
<td>(value 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 self-presentation possibilities for citizens</td>
<td>(value 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. User-friendliness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 actuality</td>
<td>(value 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 compactness</td>
<td>(value 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 search/navigation help</td>
<td>(value 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 investigation/documentation help</td>
<td>(value 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 links</td>
<td>(value 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Aesthetics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 humor/parody</td>
<td>(value 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 symbols/political propaganda</td>
<td>(value 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 pictures</td>
<td>(value 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 visual attractiveness/appeal</td>
<td>(value 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 design/structure</td>
<td>(value 5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Participation-friendliness of websites**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points for Information, Interactivity, User friendliness, Aesthetics</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Below average</th>
<th>Above average</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 – 15</td>
<td>16 – 30</td>
<td>31 – 45</td>
<td>46 – 60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points for Participation Friendliness</td>
<td>1 – 60</td>
<td>61 – 120</td>
<td>121 – 180</td>
<td>181 – 240</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The qualitative and quantitative aspects are equally important for all categories. They should be used to construct a good website, which serves users’ needs in a satisfactory way. It always depends upon the purpose of the website and the target group.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

The intention of this chapter is to show the need for bringing single areas together in one framework to provide a broad picture of the quality of a website. The suggested categories can still be better theoretically underpinned, conceptualized, and categorized. Moreover, their proper application always depends on the purpose and nature of the website and the cultural context. Especially, the aesthetics should no longer be ignored when talking about useable and engaging websites since they can play a crucial role in motivating the citizens to get engaged with the content of the site. The movement from book to screen, from print to digital with changed concepts of space, time, togetherness, and communication provides so many surprises, opportunities, hopes, and fears that none of us can say how it will play out. Our experiences in the “virtual world” will affect our perceptions and activities in “real world.” With changed media and communication, the concept of the public sphere and democracy also changes. But how we judge these changes is less important than combining our expertise to actively create this new public space/new part of our public sphere. A shared common world (with public and private discourse) requires the people’s participation. In order to design meaningful and attractive websites, designers must understand how citizens use and perceive the sites they visit. Therefore, the user should be in the center of the design. Moreover, users and perceptions may vary among various types of websites and tasks, so we should start with specific contexts before we draw general conclusions.

It is clear that the potential of the Internet to enhance citizens’ participation not only depends upon the design and content of their websites, but on a number of factors, such as an institutional framework of a political system, access to the websites, electronic literacy of citizens, resources, and the goodwill of the political actors.

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Appendix 1. Criteria for the Assessment-Scheme

Information

This category focuses on the general utility of the information in terms of its volume, quality, and type. It is not intended to evaluate how democratic and reliable the actual content is.

1.1. Self-Presentation and Public Relations (value 1)

Does the website provide information about the organization, its purpose and belonging? Is the Internet used as a vehicle for appropriate public relations (the purpose of the website, major events and dates, self-presentation)? Is the news service well organized (press releases, press and picture archives, contact person)? Does the website provide enough information to form opinion about the people and institution behind it (curriculum vitae, point of view about actual issues, present political position, etc.)?

1.2. External Information (value 2)

It concerns additional information service (e.g. actual news, situation abroad, links to other organizations, information about the actions of social movements, and members of the constituency). Mobile information services about upcoming events, weather, etc., are also included here. We assume that citizens can benefit from this in an indirect way by gaining broader knowledge in their preparation of activities. It may change their position or spur them to action or at least attract their interest. It gives them a good overview of actual political and public processes and allows them to get more detailed information about the subjects and organizations they are interested in.

1.3. General/Boulevard Information (value 3)

Information can be made available online from or about government departments, citizens’ advice bureaus, libraries, council offices, and many other (public) institutions, particularly at the local level (e.g., opening hours, job offerings, contact-addresses, associations, registered societies, statistical data, information about the use of the public purse, events and cultural offerings, other information which helps to organize daily life of active citizens).

1.4. Political Information for Citizens (value 4)

This criterion considers whether political information contributes to the transparency and facilitates political participation. During elections, the following would be of special interest: candidates with their personal aims and point of views, statements, speeches, articles, interviews, publications, and other information on actual issues reflecting the (partisan) viewpoints as well as other opinions, election results, political agendas, information about elections, and planned actions in the constituency, information focused on local issues.
1.5. Political Background Information (value 5)

This subcategory examines whether diverse opinions of citizens, media, or opponents are shown as well as comments and polls. Can citizens find a range of different opinions, origins, reasons, and expectation of the political message that are not found on the evening news? Is there any information which contains comparisons between candidates, messages, issues, party policies?

**Interactivity**

This category deals with the possibilities which a website offers citizens to use and debate the supplied information. Does the site treat users as passive recipients of information rather than as active citizens?

2.1. Read-Only-Service (value 1)

Websites can simply post essays to provide citizens with (political) information without giving the possibility for any kind of interactions like comments, requests, reaction, or deliberation. Does the website give pure passive information without input or feedback possibilities for the citizens? This one-way communication is better than no information, but it would not meet the needs of a politically interested user and does not exploit the potential of the Internet.

2.2. Read-And-Just-Write-Service (value 2)

Does a website offer possibilities for sending an e-mail (e.g., for further information, complaints or direct contact with a politician, a party member, candidate, or activist, etc.)? Is there a feedback possibility via e-mail? Contacting the e-candidate might be the first step of getting involved in politics.

2.3. Electronic Correspondence (value 3)

Does the website promote online transaction services with regular feedback loops? Do they guarantee that communication can be reciprocal? For example, are there e-mailing lists, a guest book, newsletter, and online campaigns to join on the website? Does the website link political experts or administrators with “ordinary” citizens? Can citizens, for example, attend online consulting hours, fill in feedback forms about the site, register online for a campaign or party membership, make reservations and order brochures online, conduct or participate in opinion polls, enroll for a course, or apply for a job online?
2.4. Forums, Chat Groups (value 4)

Does the website provide a chat room so that the newly assimilated information can be discussed vertically as well as horizontally (e.g., with the owner of the site), linking citizens directly to one another? Are there forums for different (partisan) citizens/groups to find a public voice? For how many topics does the website offer discussion groups? Are these groups moderated and are political actors also joining them?

2.5. Self-presentation Possibilities (value 5)

Self-presentation possibilities center on whether a website helps citizens to organize common activities by themselves. The websites of political parties, politicians, or civic organizations can, for example, offer citizens to make their own page. In this way, people can present and discuss actual information that is, in their opinion, interesting for their fellow citizens (e.g., local issues, building plans, activities). Especially people who are not so familiar with buying a domain and building own website would feel supported and encouraged by these possibilities.

User-friendliness

This criterion concerns how easy it is to use a political website.

3.1. Actuality (value 1)

Does the website provide citizens with the latest (election) news, press-releases, forthcoming events, hot topics, major political news, news from the region, etc.? How often is the information updated and how many dead sites/pages exist?

3.2. Compactness (value 2)

Is the information well-structured and is it linked so that one can click further without surfing through the entire website? Is the site quickly readable and understandable? Is there superfluous information or is the most important political information is brought to the forefront?

3.3. Search/Navigation Assistance (value 3)

The navigation system and the menu points are crucial for the user to get the required information easily and quickly. Furthermore, there should be a sitemap which provides a general overview and contains pictures to snap/click on. How understandable is the chosen name for the presented menu point? Are all pages included in the navigation?

3.4. Investigation and Documentation Assistance (value 4)

Especially beginners may need additional help to find the required information, documentation, and comments. Therefore, it is important to offer appropriate possibilities for investigation like databases, searching machines, archives, and possibilities to bookmark the site, print, or download the documents. Are there
search engines? Do the results correspond to the typed keywords? Are there other language versions? Are innovative technologies used to download videos, speeches, or slide shows quickly (also inexpensively)?

3.5. Links (value 5)

Links contain information or recommendations beyond the context of the current text. They should be organized to help a user, but not to distract or disorientate. Therefore, the text/name of the link and its placement is very important. A special links section should be arranged by topic and be commented. Strategically connected links can facilitate citizens’ interest in political participation.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics appeals to our senses and to our intellect. It is about how creative, innovative, and appropriate the sites/messages are designed to attract citizens’ attention.

4.1. Humor/Parody (value 1)

Even politically active citizens like to be entertained. It is about the style and language of the presentation. Does the site use tools of political humor (e.g., parodies, political cartoons and caricatures, funny pictures, ironic or polemic ways of writing, funny/sarcastic comments about the life and love of political actors, anecdotes)? Are there additional offerings, for example, the possibility to send funny e-cards about politicians, or animations, etc.?

4.2. Symbols/ Political Propaganda (value 2)

Symbols can help make abstract topics more concrete. In this context, it is about whether there is appropriate political propaganda (not an overload at the cost of useful political information). Do websites use typical and well-known (national) symbols, like the colors of the American flag, to strengthen the feeling of unity and identity? How attractive is the language? Are the used metaphors and symbols understandable and constant?

4.3. Pictures (value 3)

Photos, illustrations, or graphics can help visualizing the topic/problem, simplify complex connections, and facilitate reading. Moreover, pictures can communicate their own message. Through their appropriate design, they should help form the right impression.
4.4. Visual Appeal/Attractiveness (value 4)

This criterion deals with the general style of the website. The pages should be appropriate in length, clearly laid out, and readable. The appeal and friendliness of the website depends on the colors, typography, unity of single sites, appropriate use of multimedia elements, etc.

4.5. Design/Technology (value 5)

This focuses on interface design and the technology that was used. Concerning the used technology, crucial issues are: compatibility for older browsers, loading speed, offer of alternatives for missing plug-ins (e.g., a flash and html version), the absence of frames in order to find the site via search engines, using of the site without changing the settings (e.g., screen resolution, enabling cookies).

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Chapter 7
Empirical Evaluation of Government and Websites

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With the networks in place an interactive technology to hand, people can vote on issues, inform themselves on government policy, and interrogate their representatives: they can become the active, effective citizen of the democratic dream (Street, 1997, p. 28).

Abstract
This chapter argues that websites can be useful to improve democratic citizenship. Since political participation is crucial to democracy, political websites should be constructed to enhance citizens' participation. Political websites form a particular case, so does their participation friendliness. Therefore, the participation friendliness of political websites is of great importance. This study explores websites' characteristics that could improve active citizenship. It develops an assessment scheme for the participation friendliness of political websites that takes into account participatory characteristics that are relevant from the point of view of political communication. It also presents an application of this scheme to some political websites in Western and Eastern European countries in 1999. The study reveals profound distinctions between political websites in various Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries as well as distinctions between political websites of CEE countries and EU countries.

User-friendliness for the Citizen

The Internet shows great promise for democracy in terms of revitalized patterns of political communications from a citizen’s point of view. It is often said to be the perfect instrument for returning (at least some) power to citizens. It is considered to have great participatory potential, enlarging and improving possibilities for “ordinary citizens” (not only privileged ones, such as candidates, journalists, rich and influential people, and organizations) to participate in the public sphere of a representative democracy. In established democracies, it is increasingly claimed that citizens are distracted with inefficient participation activities, while important plans and decisions are made elsewhere out of their reach.

The citizens’ political role is increasingly considered too minimal (Barber, 1984). Traditional media (such as press and television) are supposed to be guides for citizens in politics and decision making. They also act as watch dogs to ensure democratic and accountable performances by elected politicians. But they have long been criticized for their inability (even lack of interest) to serve political needs of civil society in any appropriate way. Thus, the arrival of a new, “unmediated” medium (such as the Internet) may reestablish these links between society and politicians as well as bring citizens closer to and better acquaint them with political issues, bypassing and/or supplementing traditional media functions.
Potentially, the Internet offers even greater opportunities for transitional societies and new democracies. In these countries, the possibilities for political participation and free speech were very limited for decades because of the well-known and vigilant activities of the single party and security service apparatus (Krasnoboka, 2002). Here, the Internet can establish a new type of political participation, devoid of the interference of these previous political regimes and traditional wrongdoing of established capitalist democracies.

All in all, the Internet (with its participation-friendly characteristics like interactivity, world wide and free accessibility, and new user-control features) seems to be quite welcome in different parts of the world. But what would such an “electronically enhanced democracy” look like? The term “electronically enhanced democracy” means any democratic political system in which computers and computer networks are used to carry out crucial functions of the democratic process, such as information and communication, interest articulation and aggregation, and decision-making, including deliberation as well as voting (Hagen, 1997). In general, increasing the level and quality of citizens’ political participation possibilities is a major goal (Barber, Mattson, and Peterson, 1997). Therefore, our main questions are: Does the use of the Internet make it possible to improve the existing representative democratic system by making it more responsive, transparent, and accessible for citizens? Can the Internet really help to enhance the flow of information and communication between and among political institutions, citizens, and politicians? Can websites in the public sphere help to improve citizen participation?

In theory, the democratic potential of the Internet seems appropriate to optimize “role-fulfillment” of public actors as well as citizens. That is at least what one group of Internet researchers, the so-called cyber optimists (Norris, 2000) suggest. They hope that the Internet can provide new opportunities for facilitating active citizenship in a representative democracy. With the help of the Internet, people from all over the world can communicate with each other; everyone can access any public actor, institution, or politician to discuss and clearly understand which decisions are made on their behalf and to influence their decisions (Rheingold, 1993; Coleman, 1999; Mambrey, et al., 1999; Bonchek, 1995).

More pessimistic voices claim that the Internet cannot be expected to transform existing disparities of power and wealth, to facilitate increased access to policy makers, or to make political processes more transparent to increase the level of citizens' political participation. They emphasize the importance of technical and economic problems in accessing computers (Ward, et al., 2003).

Who is right? Strong claims from both sides are not scientifically well founded and research often has not gone further than popular rhetoric. The Internet is a complex and changing medium. Research thereon remains fragmented, not presenting any general and logical picture. So, the answer is currently unclear and requires that we weigh many factors in addition to those stressed already.
This study lays no claim to accounting for all possible views and criteria concerned with the “democratic” impact of cyberspace. Neither does it take a firm cyber-optimist position. The study starts from the moderate assumption that to make the representative democratic system more responsive and to enhance citizens’ political participation, websites (as an additional channel of political communication) should at least be designed in a participation-friendly way. Besides controversial questions like universal access, media competence, organizational structures, and the people's willingness to increase their political engagement, one major problem is the design and content of websites in the public, party, and political spheres (Löfgren, et al., 1999; Mambrey, et al., 1999).

Eurobarometer data reveal that only 10% of those with access to the Internet in EU countries visited a party website in 2000. Other data suggest that in the 2000 US and in the 1988 Danish elections, only 7% to 8% visited candidates' sites. In the 2001 UK elections, only 2% visited party sites (Ward, et al., 2003; Norris, 2001b; Crabtree, 2001). The dominance of dead, dated, and unsatisfying political websites raises doubts about the potential of the Internet to promote a better-informed and more active citizenry (Resnick, 1998; Davis, 1999; Sassi, 2000). We argue that citizens will only be encouraged to use websites if they are easy to access, contain current and engaging content, and are “user-friendly.”

User-friendliness refers to how useable a website is or the extent to which a website supports its users in completing their tasks efficiently, effectively, and satisfactorily (Preece, 2002; Graber and White, 2001). Therefore, the participation friendliness of political websites has user-friendliness as a base, but it also emphasizes how the design of the website can motivate and encourage citizens to become active or to participate in the public sphere both on- and offline.

We next turn to the concept of active citizenship and people's participation in the public sphere. Then, we introduce our applied assessment scheme. In the section after that, our key research findings for CEE countries as well as EU countries are summarized.

The Internet and Political Participation

Why improve political participation possibilities at all? How can the Internet help accomplish that goal? In a democracy, the main function of citizens' political participation is to keep the political system balanced by legitimating the actions of the politicians through citizen support (Milbrath, 1965; Barber, 1984). Political participation can be seen in terms of communication concerned with influencing public opinion or participating in the political life of a democracy. Nowadays, in European countries, the prevailing model is representative democracy. Considering the shrinkage of the nation state and the growing importance of (worldwide) social movements (Norris, 200 la and b), the target for such participation has widened beyond national governments. There are various definitions of political participation (Verba, et al., 1978; Milbrath, 1965). For our purpose, we distinguish
among four different dimensions of political participation that could be improved through the political use of the Internet.

First, the basic dimension of political participation is information-seeking. With the Internet, far more information can be made available, which thus can increase e-political knowledge and awareness of political issues. Any kind of political documents (such as political news, submissions from interested parties, and speeches of representatives as well as arguments from private individuals) could be made instantly available. Directly through their websites, parties can provide citizens with much more information than before. The same holds true for candidates, local parties, and individual party members who now can produce their own sites. Dissenting voices can also profit from the electronic platform. Citizens who felt (because of the role of media gate keepers like TV and radio) excluded can autonomously interact as communicators online, spread active information, and react to any article or event (Hague and Uhm, 2003; Ward, et al., 2003; Bowie, 2003). The effect of the opportunities for information seekers that the Internet provides is, indeed, highly dependent on the willingness of public actors to make political processes more transparent. Therefore, the politicians as well as the intermediary systems have to put required political information in an appropriate form on their website (Barber, Mattson, and Peterson, 1997, p. 38).

Active political discussion with one's family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and elected representatives is the second dimension of political participation. Perhaps one of the best ways to increase citizens’ participation in the public sphere is to foster community connections. Civic networks can provide discussion groups on community issues ranging from children’s playgrounds to local politics. The Internet can give more opportunities for collective public discussion (on- as well as offline) and reflection on issues of importance among citizens, interest groups, and political parties. Such virtual communities are not supposed to replace face-to-face meetings, but rather to complement them (Miller, 1996, p. 35). Moreover, elected representatives can be asked to explain political issues or to report back on their own voting record or speeches. Discussions about progress within legislatures can be held instantly among citizens as well as with politicians. Until now, most communications from party websites were not really interactive. Parties are sparing in their interactivity because opening up one's site to comment with bulletin boards and chat rooms is a risky gambit (Ward, et al., 2003; Hague and Uhm, 2003; Margolis, et al., 1997, 1999; Davis, 1999). Again, the impact of the Internet in this respect depends on the willingness of public actors to make their sites more responsive.

Voting is the third dimension of political participation. Many scholars believe it is the central, most important one. Traditional mass media (like newspapers and television) are increasingly blamed for not fulfilling their public task by covering prominent and influential candidates/parties and by distorting and trivializing political information instead of making political processes more transparent.
(Oberreuter, 1982). Anyhow, there is a widespread decrease in levels of partisan attachment among voters for political parties. The finding from the Dutch 1998 elections that there was a consensus that if a website does not do any good, it does not do harm either, may be worth noting (Ward, et al., 2003; Erik-Lane and Ersson, 1996). The Internet (with its varied interactive information and communication possibilities) can compensate for some of these deficiencies. The new services can engage voters on matters of substance rather than style or symbolic politics, getting beyond 30-second advertisements, sound bites, or the usual horse-race campaign coverage and narrow the distance between representatives and the electorate (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, 1988, p. 91). Candidates can contact their potential electorate directly and personally and try to convince and mobilize them as Bob Dole in the 1996 US presidential campaign did, “This is an important business - this election is important. I ask for your support, I ask for your help . . . if you really want to get involved, just tap into my homepage.”

Political activity is the fourth dimension. It includes political activists working on campaigns, organizing local party events or citizen initiatives, participating in community forums, and managing or participating in interest groups, social movements, and similar activities. For social movements, the Internet is increasingly useful for overcoming the problem of collective action. And younger voters are more likely to use the web politically because they are the computer-literate generation (Ward, et al., 2003; Coleman, 2001). As a direct and interactive channel of communication, the Internet provides additional ways to prepare political actions on- and offline. Citizens can tell their representatives their demands and needs at length, without fighting for a role as a minor communicator in the mass media system. It may be true that most survey evidence testifies to the dominance of major parties in cyberspace, just as in traditional media (Ward, et al., 2003). Interest groups (including the smaller and less influential ones) now have more opportunities to inform, recruit, and motivate citizens. Lots of other participatory activities (like parliamentary hearings, building-plans, community work, and citizens’ initiatives) can be optimized with these new interactive information and communication possibilities (Gotze, 1998; Barnett, 1997, p. 206). The Internet can facilitate their political expression and engagement (McGookin, 1995; Wilhelm, 2000). The following section deals with identifying the criteria for “participation-friendly” political websites and explains our applied assessment scheme.

Assessing Participation-Friendliness of Political Websites

Our assessment scheme for public websites (De Landtsheer, Krasnoboka, and Neuner, 1999) aims to cover the previously mentioned dimensions of political participation. The main categories of the scheme (see Table 1 in Chapter 6) assess how much political websites contain elements that facilitate citizens’ political participation. Furthermore, the criteria we distinguished are based on the latest
relevant literature (books, articles, case studies, guidelines) of diverse fields (psychology, sociology, political science, media studies, human-computer interaction, web design, computer science, information systems, marketing, entertainment, and business).

This assessment scheme includes four main categories/criteria. These criteria include information, interactivity, user-friendliness, and aesthetics. Each main category includes five subcriteria. The category of Information pays attention to the amount, quality, and type of information. Interactivity deals with the possibilities offered to be an active citizen rather than a disengaged recipient of information. User-friendliness refers to the ease with which users can navigate the site as well as find and use information and services. Aesthetics covers the audience’s whole perception of the website. It addresses the arrangement and style of the written words and of the visual elements with which the medium invites and challenges a user to follow its lead. The criteria and subcriteria are intended to represent minimum standards only, not best practice, so they slightly overlap.

**How Informative are Websites?**

The first evaluation category is entitled Information. It deals with the general utility of the information, focusing on amount, quality, and type of information. It is not intended to evaluate thoroughly how democratic and reliable the actual site content is. We distinguished the following subcategories for this criterion:

- **Self Presentation and Public Relations (value 1).** Does the website provide some information about the organization, its purpose, and the institutions to which it belongs? Does the sender use the Internet as a vehicle for appropriate public relations (major events and dates, philosophy, services)? Is the news service well-organized (press releases, press archives, picture archives, contact person)? Does the website provide the citizens with enough information (curriculum vitae, point of view about actual issues, present political position) to form their own opinions about the main persons or institutions of the website? The value 1 is given as a weight factor because this kind of information is basic and crucial for users entering a website; they need to quickly establish its purpose, receive orienting help, and access legal information (such as from whom, why, and for whom the site is made).

- **External Information (value 2).** Does the site provide for additional information services (e.g., news, the situation abroad, links to other organizations, information about the actions of social movements or related issues such as a link to community activities in the constituency)? Up-to-date information services about upcoming events, about the weather, etc. are included in this category. We assume that the citizens can benefit from this in an indirect way like gaining broader knowledge to prepare to act. It might change how they see the world, spur them to action, or at least attract their interest. It gives them a
good overview about actual political and public processes and allows them to get more detailed information about the subjects and organizations they are interested in. That is why the weight factor here is valued as a 2.

- **General/Boulevard Man-on-the-street Information (value 3).** This subcategory refers to information that can be made available online from (or about) government departments, citizens' advice bureaus, libraries, council offices, and many other (public) institutions, particularly on the local level. It should be useful for citizens (e.g., opening hours, job offerings, contact addresses, associations, registered societies, statistical data, information about the use of public funds, events, and cultural offerings, or other kinds of information which might be helpful to active citizens). Also, general information concerning the privacy and security implications of site use is found in this category. The value 3 reflects the importance of matters of interest to the public in general, especially on the local level. Even with increased global/transnational public sphere activity, it is the local level where people's sense of communal identity tends to be the strongest. Furthermore, activities at the local level might foster latent citizen appetite for political involvement.

- **Political Information for the Citizens (value 4).** This subcriterion considers whether the supplied political information contributes to the transparency of democratic processes and facilitates deliberation and political participation. During elections, the following would be of special interest: candidates' personal aims and point of views, statements, speeches, articles, interviews, publications, and other information on actual issues reflecting (partisan) viewpoints as well as various open opinions, election results, political agendas, information about elections and planned actions in the constituency, and local issues. This could encourage citizens to react (e.g., through opinion-building, discussing information with fellow citizens, establishing priorities, and organizing political action). Political information about actual issues is vital for participation; therefore, the weight factor's value is 4.

- **Political Political Background Information (value 5).** This subcategory examines whether diverse opinions of citizens, media, or opponents are shown as well as editorial judgment, in-depth analysis, comments, and polls. Does the website provide citizens with issue-specific information of the kind that is not limited by the formal and general presentation of the issue you find in the mass media? Can citizens find a range of different opinions, reasons, and political messages that are not found in the evening news? Is there any information which compares candidates, messages, issues, or party policies? Such information is essential for understanding politics, for forming your own point of view, and thus engaging in political actions. This reflects the value 5.
Are the Websites Interactive?

This category deals with the questions: Which possibilities do political websites offer citizens so they can debate with other citizens as well as with politicians, candidates, media, and communities? Does the website treat users as passive recipients of information rather than as active citizens? It was not intended to provide evidence concerning turnaround times or limitations on the service.

- **Read-Only-Service (value 1).** Does the website give purely passive information without input or feedback possibilities for the citizens? Read-only based websites simply post essays to provide the citizens with (political) information, without giving them a chance to make any kind of comments, requests, reaction, or deliberation. This one-way communication is better than no information but would not meet the needs of the politically interested user; it does not exploit the full potential of the Internet at all. Therefore, we give the value 1 as the weight factor.

- **Read-And-Just-Write Service (value 2).** One may assume that institutions offer certain opportunities for two-way communications via the Internet. This service may include sending an e-mail for further information, filing complaints, or directly contacting a politician, a party member, candidate, or activist. At the end of each single page of the site is there a feedback opportunity via e-mail (e.g., to contact the author) or does this exist only on the starting page or not at all? A personal contact address (on- and offline) at the end of each page gives the citizen a feeling of support and credibility. Contacting the e-candidate might be the first step in getting involved in politics. Thus, the value 2 seems appropriate.

- **Electronic Correspondence (value 3).** The first two interactive services mentioned previously cannot be seen as original possibilities offered by the Internet. They are relatively often used in traditional political campaigns as well as by traditional media. However, the Internet can be used to intensify and broaden interactive contacts between political actors and citizens. Online guest books and feedback, newsletters, and e-mailing lists allow an increased amount and quality communication as well as its frequency and intensity. Does a website promote online transaction services with regular feedback loop? Do they guarantee reciprocal communication? For example, are there e-mail lists, a guestbook, a newsletter, and online campaigns to join on the website? Does the website link political experts or administrators with “ordinary” citizens? For example, can citizens attend online visiting hours, fill in feedback forms about the website, register online for campaign or party membership, make reservations and order brochures online, conduct or participate in opinion polls on current topics, enroll for a course, or apply for a job online? Value 3 for the weight factor refers to the fact that facilitating such kinds of civic activities via the Internet may motivate citizens for further political engagement.
• Forums, Chat Groups (value 4). This subcategory concerns possibilities to communicate political information inside or outside elections. Does a website provide a chat room, so that the newly assimilated information can be discussed vertically as well as horizontally (e.g., with the owner of the site) and link citizens directly to one another? Are there forums for different (partisan) citizens/groups to find a public voice? For how many topics does the site offer discussion groups? Are these groups moderated and are political actors joining them? Forums or chat groups that are only provided via a link do not count in this category. Fostering community connections (on- and offline) is said to be helpful for encouraging citizens’ participation. The value 4 for the weight factor reflects this.

• Self-Presentation Possibilities (value 5). This subcategory centers on whether the website helps citizen to engage in, as well as to organize, common activities by themselves. The websites of political parties, politicians, or civic organizations provide a wide range of activities. For example, they can offer citizens an opportunity to make their own pages within a website to present themselves, to share their viewpoints, and to mobilize others. In this way, people can present and discuss actual information that is, in their opinion, interesting for their fellow citizens (e.g., local issues, building plans, activities). For many people, it is still a barrier to buy their own domain and create their own websites. Thus, offering them a “web space” where they can publish content easily can foster their engagement on- and offline. They will feel more involved and can motivate others in a powerful way; therefore, the value is 5.

How User-friendly are the Sites

This criterion concerns how easy it is to use political websites. It concerns the effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction with which users can achieve their tasks. The category also encompasses adapting the website’s design to the needs of handicapped people (e.g., ability to enlarge the text, alternative texts, or additional pictorial descriptions).

• Actuality (value 1). Does the website provide citizens with the latest or major (election) news, press releases, upcoming events, hot topics, regional news, etc.? How frequently is the information updated and how many “dead” sites and links exist? The date of the latest review or content on each page should be stated. It is very important to keep the public informed and interested in elections, even if the news is not directly related to a particular election campaign. This is the basis for establishing credibility and trust; therefore, we use the value 1 for the weight factor.

• Compactness (value 2). Is information prepared in an appropriate way for publication on the Internet? According to surveys, online readers prefer small information units, presented in a clear way, and they do not like scrolling. On a
website, distracting advertising banners or pop-up messages should be limited. Is information structured well and is it linked so that one can click further when it is appropriate, without surfing through the entire website? Does a website contain quick and understandable units of information and news or does a reader find long articles or copies of printed ones on it? Is there too much superfluous information? Is the most important political information up to the date? The value 2 refers to the necessity for easily readable sites to keep a user motivated and satisfied.

- **Search/Navigation Assistance (value 3).** On-site search engines and navigational devices are crucial for users to find the information and services they require from the site. There should be assistance with searching and an indication of exactly what the search engine will seek. The results should be according to the keywords the users entered, avoiding too many irrelevant items. The browser system should provide navigation options to the users; these options should be used consistently throughout the site. Good navigation devices (for example, Home> About> Party Leader) display the current page’s context within the site structure, keep users aware of their location on the site, and make it obvious how information is grouped (allowing users to move easily between these groups). Furthermore, there should be features designed to assist browsing, such as site maps, menus with unambiguous button names, and help options. Are all sites included through site navigation or are there “one-way streets?” Without properly working navigation devices and search engines, the users will quickly become frustrated and leave the site; therefore, weight factor 3 seems appropriate.

- **Investigation and Documentation Assistance (value 4).** Beginners might need some additional help to find required information and services and learn how to use the site. Therefore, it is important to offer appropriate and diverse possibilities for investigation (e.g., databases, search machines, archives), ways to bookmark the site, as well as print or download documents. Different areas (e.g., archives, job section, surveys, interviews, press) should be accessible to the public, not just be restricted to “members only.” Do they offer the content of the website in different languages (English, Spanish)? Does the site provide the option to download or print longer articles? Do providers use innovative technologies to download videos, speeches, or slide shows quickly? Can you bookmark the most interesting sites (no frames)? Good applications for documentation and help will have a supportive effect on the user’s further activities. In this respect, value 4 seems appropriate.

- **Links (value 5).** Links are characteristic for hypertext; they contain information or recommendations beyond the context of the current text. They should be organized to help the users, but not to distract or disorient them (especially external links). Therefore, the text/name of the link is very important as is its placement. Ideally, a special links-section should be arranged by topic with
instructions. For example, the clever use of hyperlinks can give citizens a good overview of actual political processes and allow them to get (via a “mouse click”) more detailed information. Or they bring together the most important (election campaign) related websites to compare and connect citizens, politicians, and institutions in various combinations. Links can lead citizens back to related on- or offline media resources or to local face-to-face networks that might be better at building social trust and nurturing democratic practices. Strategically connected links through the Internet could facilitate as well as increase citizens' interest in political participation by guiding them through the site and encouraging political action; therefore, we give it value 5.

Are the Sites Aesthetically Pleasing?

Aesthetics plays an important role in how citizens perceive websites. Aesthetics covers the experience that involves and appeals to our senses and intellect. The mediated feeling of what people are reading, seeing, and hearing makes them stay or click away. It is about how creative, innovative, and appropriate the sites/messages are and if they are designed to attract citizens’ attention.

- Humor/Parody (value 1). Even politically interested citizens prefer to be entertained (the notion of infotainment), rather than be subjected to purely formal, dry political information. It is about the style/language of the information. Does a website use political humor (e.g., parodies, political cartoons and caricatures, funny pictures, ironic or polemic ways of writing, funny/sarcastic comments about the lives and loves of political actors, anecdotes)? Are there. additional offerings? We ascribe this category the value 1 because style, tone, humor, emotion, and vocabulary are basic for citizens’ motivation to participate.

- Symbols/Political Propaganda (value 2). This category aims at judging the persuasiveness of political communication and the language used (e.g., metaphors) or presentation of symbols. Symbols can help make abstract topics more concrete. In this context, it is about whether there is an appropriate use of political propaganda and symbols to help citizens engage with the website. Do they often use typical (national) symbols (like the colors of the American flag) to strengthen the feeling of unity and identity? In what way do they try to convince citizens of the importance of their help/support as well as benefits for citizens? How attractive is the language to appeal to or recruit new fans/members? Are the metaphors and symbols used on the website understandable and consistent? Appropriate symbols and persuasiveness make it easier to motivate citizens for political action; value 2 for the weight factor reflects this. But if there is an overload of political propaganda instead of useful political information, the site is not rated as participation-friendly.
• Pictures (value 3). “One picture is worth a thousand words.” Pictures have always been popular means to convey messages and to persuade people. Photos, illustrations, or graphics can help to visualize a topic/problem and can simplify complex connections. An appropriate design should help form the right impression about the politician, institution, or situation at hand (e.g., pictures of members of parliament or of planned public buildings). Since we think in pictures and they cause effects and construct visual images, this category is very important for enhancing participation. Value 3 reflects this. But if the site only shows pictures of certain politicians (“personalization”) or has manipulated pictures, it would not be judged as “appropriate” because it hardly provides citizens with useful information. This is the same for pictures which have long loading periods because they make users click away. It is more about the quality of design pictures than about quantity. Too many pictures could even conflict with valuable written information.

• Visual Appeal/Attractiveness (value 4). In today’s world, our perception is almost always mediated and all forms of mediation are equally important. There is power in communication beyond written or spoken words (visuals like signs, colors, videos, sound, and body language); nonverbal communication delivers its own message. This subcategory deals with the general style of the website, assuming that the style is inviting and challenges citizens to follow its lead. The pages should be appropriate in length, clearly laid out, and readable. Using headings and the right color and font aid visibility. They should create a space where people feel stimulated and comfortable, reflecting an atmosphere beneficial for building up communities. The site should appeal to the target audience (e.g., a “games for the kid” section). The appeal and friendliness of the website depends on the colors used, typography, unity of single sites, and appropriate use of multimedia elements. These factors influence how much citizens feel encouraged to participate. In this context, important questions include: Are text versions accompanied by parts of video/audio files or pictures/eye-catchers? How funny, fascinating, and colorful is the website? Does it have a unified layout? The value 4 reflects the power of visual communication to raise citizens’ interest to participate.

• Design/Technology (value 5). This subcategory refers to the interface design and technology used. Concerning the technology used, crucial issues are: compatibility with older browsers, loading speed, a supply of alternatives for missing plug-ins (e.g., a flash and html version), the absence of frames to find the site via search engines, and the ability to work the site without changing settings (e.g., screen resolution, enabling cookies). Online readers follow other principles than when reading a print article (e.g., their reading is more superficial, the first eye fixations are different, and they do not like long articles). Therefore, the way the site is set up and structured is very crucial (unifying site structure, arranging elements logically, putting the most important
information on top). Only logically categorized content based on users’ needs will enable citizens to participate without expressing frustration; therefore, we assign the value 5.

How Can We Assess Websites?

The quality of websites is measured according to the previously mentioned four main categories, each of which can attain a maximum of 60. Thus, a perfect website could receive 240 points. We have given each subcriterion a weight factor based on its estimated strength to support civic engagement. The higher value of a subcategory in regard to participation-friendliness, the higher the weight factor. The weight factors are a result of discussion among the co-authors.

Within each main category (information, interactivity, user-friendliness, and aesthetics), a maximum of 4 points is given to each of the subcategories (0 point = not present, 1 point = scarcely present, 2 points = average present, 3 points = above average present, 4 points = overwhelmingly present). These points are multiplied with the corresponding weight factors. After summing up, one gets the points for each main category. The general sum of all categories (information, interactivity, user-friendliness, and aesthetics) presents us with a general indicator of the participation-friendliness of the political website. The more points a website gets, the more participation-friendly it is assumed to be.

Political Websites in Various European Countries

This case study compares certain European political websites from January 1999 to the end of May 1999. In January 1999, we analyzed various political websites in Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK within the framework of a pilot study. During Spring 1999, we examined an extensive sample of political websites in Russia, the Ukraine, Poland, and former Yugoslavia. Then, we compared the results of our websites’ survey within and between Western and Eastern Europe to gather information regarding the development of electronic democracy in Europe.

International statistics (http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/europe.-html) show that Europe is the second continent after North America to have broad and intensive Internet penetration. Compared to other continents, Europe represents the rich end of the digital divide. However, distribution of and Internet penetration within European countries is far from being equal. On the one hand, a majority of the European Union states can not only compete with the most digitalized country (United States) but on the other hand, can also produce (even better than can the US) positive results on the issue of bridging the gap between Internet have’s and have-not’s. Many countries of the former Soviet Union and Socialist Block have Internet penetration rates equal to African countries. It is more than obvious that on the issue of Internet accessibility, citizens of Sweden (with its high Internet penetration rate and diversity of online services and providers) can not be properly
compared with Albania. In this respect, we can clearly see a serious digital divide within the European continent (Norris, 2001a, 2001b). However, this explains only the economic and technical side of the problem. At the same time, we may think about other parameters related to Internet use which can bridge certain differences between Europeans in the East and West. For example, this concerns levels of general and higher (primarily technical) education in the former Socialist bloc's countries. Quality of education can be seen as an advantage both on the side of potential Eastern European Internet users and on the side of potential website creators in these countries. We may assume that once technology is available there, Eastern European citizens will then develop sufficient skills to use it for their own benefit.

For each country we investigated, we assessed the websites of the main political parties. For the EU countries (the UK, the Netherlands, Germany), we also analyzed the main governmental website and five social movement websites (Greenpeace, Amnesty International, one trade union, one youth organization, and one electronic democracy movement). For the Eastern European countries (Russia, Ukraine, Poland and former Yugoslavia), we analyzed some politicians' websites as well as a few civil movements. The empirical material for the case study was collected during 1999 when the republic of Yugoslavia still existed. Throughout the text, we therefore continue to refer to Yugoslavia, even though Serbia and Montenegro replaced former Yugoslavia.

The European Union Countries

We have evaluated 34 political websites for three EU countries according to the previously mentioned assessment scheme. The United Kingdom (10 sites), the Netherlands (12 sites), and Germany (12 sites) were our test countries. These Northern European countries were chosen as being among the most technologically advanced democracies in the world. The Netherlands, one of the smallest EU countries, is considered a “consensus” society. The United Kingdom has a highly polarized political system. Germany is a country in which the unification of the former Western (Deutsche Bundesrepublik, DB) and Eastern Germany (Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR) provided for economic and political problems and for two types of citizens. Results of our EU test cases are presented in the following paragraphs and in Figure 1.
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The United Kingdom

For this country, we analyzed the governmental website, websites of three major political parties (including Liberal Democrats), three movements’ websites (Fundamentally Green, Amnesty International, and Greenpeace), TUC trade union’s website, a website of the youth group Thinking Politica, and finally, an online democratic portal, UK Citizens Online. Websites vary among themselves in points they scored on major categories of participation friendliness (PF). In the “Information” category, three civil websites (Greenpeace, TUC, and Thinking Politica) received the highest possible score (60). They are followed by two other civil websites (57) and an online portal (54). All political parties received relatively low scores, with the Labour Party receiving the lowest core (29) among all British websites. In the Interactivity category, Thinking Politica had the highest score (56), with the majority of other websites scoring pretty low in the category.

A governmental website and political parties here again have the lowest scores, with the Labour Party warranting only 13 points. In the User-friendliness category, only Greenpeace scored the highest possible (60) and the Liberal Democrats have the lowest (21) among all websites, with all other organizations ranging between these two. In the Aesthetics category, the Conservative Party received the highest score (53) among all websites; Fundamentally Green got the lowest (16). Overall, the total score for Participation Friendliness (PF) is the highest for Thinking Politica (217) and the lowest for the Liberal Democrats (98), with all websites scoring on average 157 points. When we look at the distribution of scores among four categories of PF examined in this research, we see that the Information category scored the highest average (50), followed by the categories of User-friendliness (46), Aesthetics (36), and Interactivity (26).

The Netherlands

For this country, we analyzed one governmental website as well as those of six main political parties, two movements (Amnesty International and Greenpeace), one trade union (CNV), one youth organization, and a social portal. In the Information category, four websites (a governmental website, CDA, Amnesty International, and a student organization) received the highest possible score (60). The remaining websites scored in a range between 51 and 59, with Groen Links receiving the lowest score (49). In the Interactivity category, the governmental website scored the highest (52) and CNV trade union the lowest (13). In the User-friendliness category, the Socialist party got 60 points and Groen Links received the lowest among websites (32). In terms of Aesthetics, the Socialist party reached the highest score (57) and the CNV trade union lowest (29). In general terms, the governmental website received the highest total for PF (214), while the CNV trade union scored the lowest total (129). In terms of average score distribution between different categories, the situation here is similar to one in the UK: Information got
the highest score (56), followed by User-friendliness (45) Aesthetics (41), and Interactivity (32).

**Germany**

In the case of Germany, we looked at the governmental website websites of the six main political parties in the country, Greenpeace and Amnesty International as social movements’ websites, a website of the OTV trade union RCDS student movement’s website, and a social portal, Politik Digital. In the Information category, an online social portal scored the highest (60). Scores for other websites in this category vary dramatically, with Amnesty International having the lowest (18). The same diversity of results is characterized for our second category Interactivity. Here, the German SPD took the lead (51). The student movement’s website scored lowest (9). The gap between the best and the worst scoring websites in the User-friendliness category is also very big, with Greenpeace getting 60, but Amnesty International only 13. Aesthetics has become prominent on the SPD website (54). Once again, Amnesty International scored the lowest (22). In general terms, two international social movements became the best and the worst scored websites for Germany: Greenpeace took the lead (219), while Amnesty International got only 65 points for its Participation Friendliness (PF). In terms of average score distributions among four categories of PF in the scheme, the German case slightly differed from two other EU countries. Here, the Information category (44) was followed by Aesthetics (42). User-friendliness came in third (36), with Interactivity bringing up the rear (29).

**Key Findings**

If we now compare our results among the three countries, we see that the Netherlands had, on average, the highest PF (174), followed by the United Kingdom (157) and Germany (151.5). To a large extent, the average results across four categories do not differ a lot among the countries. For all of them, Information was the category with the highest score and Interactivity, the lowest. For the Netherlands and the UK, User-friendliness was the second best scoring category and Aesthetics, the third. For Germany, the last two categories were reversed. Having looked at the individual websites across the countries, we found that German-based Greenpeace scored the highest (219) among all investigated websites, just a bit lower than the maximum possible 240 points. It was closely followed by the British youth website, Thinking Politica (217) and the Dutch governmental website (214). Germany also had the website which scored the lowest: Amnesty International (65), followed by the UK’s Liberal Democrats (98).

The Dutch governmental website scored the highest not only in its own country, but among all governmental websites and higher than any political party in these three countries. Among political parties, the Dutch Socialist Party (210) took
the lead, followed by the German Social Democratic Party (199). All international social movements scored rather well and quite equally, with the exception of Germany, where the Amnesty International website had the lowest score among all websites (65). At the same time, Germany’s Greenpeace website had the highest score among all websites (219). Other social movement websites received relatively average scores, neither outscoring other websites nor lagging far behind. However, it is worth repeating that the British youth website had the highest score in its country (217) and the second highest among all websites used in our analysis. At the same time, the Dutch trade union got the lowest domestic score (129) which actually was not very low at all. If we divide websites into two groups (official politics and civil society), official websites scored on average higher in the Netherlands and Germany; in the UK, civil websites got higher scores. However, the difference between two groups was not considerable and, taken together, the average scores for all countries was 157 for official sites and 160 for civil websites.

Central and Eastern European Countries

After our test analysis of the EU websites, we evaluated political websites in four CEE countries according to the same assessment scheme. We chose Russia, Poland, the former Republic of Yugoslavia, and the Ukraine. Russia is the largest European country and a center of the former Soviet Union. Poland is one of the most successful new democracies; additionally, it is a recent NATO member state and a future member of the European Union. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has undergone dramatic political and social changes during the time of analysis; this provoked our particular interest in political uses of the Internet in a country in a period of crisis. The Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe (in geographic terms) and a former Soviet Union republic; it held presidential elections in 1999. While Poland joins the EU in May 2004, Russia, Yugoslavia and the Ukraine will become the new neighbors of the enlarged EU. Results for CEE websites are presented in the following paragraphs and in Figure 2.
Christl De Landtsheer, Natalya Krasnoboka, and Conny Neuner

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Figure 2: Participation friendliness (PF) of 1999 political websites in Central and Eastern European countries; average for each country.
Russia

This country is one of the most representative Eastern European countries on the Internet. It has the greatest number of political parties with websites, nearly 20. This means that almost all leading Russian political parties realized the importance of this new medium. Nevertheless, our choice and scoring of websites was affected by the fact that not all Russian political parties opened their websites, that some websites were under construction (Nash Dom Russia site), or that some were recently revised (Democraticheskij Souz site). Among those parties which have their “pages” on the Internet, we chose the eight most popular in Russia: the Liberal Democratic Party, Communist Party, Democratic Union, Yabloko Party, NDR (Our Home is Russia), Democratic Choice of Russia, Russian Christian Democratic Party, and Constitutional Democrats.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), headed by the charismatic and populist Vladimir Zhyrinovsky, is a popular party in the country. It can be characterized as one of the most nationalist political parties in Russia. CPRF is the heiress of the former USSR Communist Party. This is one of the largest parties in Russia; its leader, Gennady Zyuganov, participated in the Russian presidential elections in June 2000. Democratic Union of Russia is one of the few Russian parties that takes a pro-Western position. This party was created around the famous Soviet dissident Valeria Novodvorskaya. The Russian social-democratic party Yabloko (Apple) is headed by Grigory Yavlinsky, a famous Russian economist and politician. This party is mainly represented and supported by intellectual and professional elites. The party name was created from the first letters of the family names of its leaders (Yavlinsky, Boldyrev, and Lukin) and the party position is social-democratic; the official symbol of the party is an apple. Another party, NDR, one of the most famous Russian parties of power, was created to support Boris Yeltsen in the 1996 presidential elections. The party occupies a centralist position; it focuses on domestic issues, social protection, and the role of Russia in the world. The party leader was Viktor Chernomyrdin, the then Prime Minister. Demokraticheskiy Vybor Rossij (Democratic Choice of Russia) is another party of intellectuals and reformers as well as a former party of power, headed by Egor Gaidar. However, unlike Yavlinsky’s Yabloko party, DVR tries to speak not only to its target electorate, but also to much broader groups of the population. For this purpose, it uses some populist methods. The Russian Christian Democratic Party (RChDP) has Aleksander Chuev as a leader; this party operates very similar to European Christian-Democratic parties. Cadets is the Party of Constitutional Democrats; their leader is Alexander Krutov.

While investigating political websites in Eastern Europe, we realized that the phenomenon of individual political websites is as popular among Eastern European politicians as websites of political parties and movements (if not even more popular than the latter two). Even when the party or political movement has a website, its leader prefers to have his/her own page as well. Considering the poor navigation
help through Russian political websites and the lacking links to other sites, we were only able to find the websites of four Russian politicians. They are the websites of Irina Hakamada, Alexander Lebed, Boris Nemtsov, and Sergey Kirienko. Sergey Kirienko was a former Prime Minister of Russia during the financial crisis in Summer 1998. He had structured and mobilized a reform project for the Russian economy, but was dismissed as Prime Minister and got a very negative evaluation from the Russian population. Hakamada is a famous Russian economist and one of the few female members of the Russian Parliament. Alexander Lebed is a former general of the Soviet Russian army, the governor of the Krasnoyarsk region. Boris Nemtsov is the former Vice Prime Minister of Russia.

Finally, we looked at three websites for social movements: Revolutionary Young Communist League, National Patriotic Front Pamyat, and the Russian National Unit. Among the three social movements chosen for our analysis, two (Pamyat and Russian National Unit) have a very strong nationalistic position. The third movement (Revolutionary Young Communist League) is a radical leftist youth movement which operates in several former Soviet Union republics.

Russian political websites differ with respect to visual appeal and exploitation of the Internet’s interactive potential. The average score of the political sites was 126. However, if we evaluate separately websites of political parties and movements, on the one hand, and personal websites of politicians, on the other, we come up with an average of 104 for parties and movements and 187.5 for personal websites. The winner is the Kirienko’s website (221) with Hakamada’s site as a well-scoring second (211) and Yabloko party’s website coming in third (207). (This was the best score for political parties and movements.) Yabloko had the most properly and successfully developed website among Russian political parties. In comparison with others, Yabloko was characterized by the most interactive usage of the Internet's communication facilities (for example, connecting the electorate and their representatives via e-mail). The party chose the “newspaper” (tabloid) design of their website, but in a clearly structured way. The Internet is primarily used by the party for two reasons: self-presentation and improving the communication flow among party members. The party is planning to create the first virtual party primary organization in Russia. Their website contained several interactive forums, numerous discussion groups, permanent opinion polls and small surveys, separate pages of its youth organization, and sites of regional organizations. Moreover, it has a virtual library (consisting of the most famous Russian and Soviet philosophical, sociological, and political books and articles since the end of the sixth century), which is remarkable.

Also the following websites scored above average: the Liberal Democratic Party (129), Russia’s Democratic Choice (133), and the Cadets (134). From an online marketing viewpoint, LDPR was probably the most successful example. Out of several interactive possibilities offered by the party’s site, only the discussion group failed since it was not moderated and lacked serious participation. The
currency of the website is visible from the starting page; instead of the usual party logo, they used pictures to portray the latest events, accompanied by slogans such as “Peace in the Balkans! No Bombs!” This is the most appropriately illustrated website among Russian political parties. Liberal Democrats even offer a song about Russia, sung by the party leader. People can send a letter to any LDPR member of the Parliament, read party announcements, and check schedules of radio and TV programs about LDPR or other related subjects. “Our news,” which presents and explains the current events (from the party’s viewpoint), is the brightest and most promotional part of the website.

The worst-scoring party website was the Russian Christian-Democratic Party (30). Three other party sites scored well below the average: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) (53), The Demokraticheskij Souz Rosij (Democratic Union of Russia) (40), and Nash Dom Rosija (Russia is Our Home) (50). The information on the Communist Party website is only about the party, itself. The site provides complete information about the party, its political publications, actions, events, and activity. Bibliographical references are poor; the English version is almost undeveloped and not up-to-date. The design gives a strict impression; although well structured, the website is stingy with visuals.

In contrast to the websites of the political parties, individual politicians use the interactive channels of the Internet to a much higher degree. Sergey Kirienko (whose website takes the lead among Russian political sites) realized the idea of an Internet parliament. Visitors to the Kirienko website can discuss the goals and tasks of the e-parliament. In addition, there are many different types of discussion groups and voting possibilities on current issues of Russian political and social life. Kirienko is probably the only Russian politician who is not “afraid” to tell funny stories about his life and political activity and who invites the visitors to join him, telling jokes and anecdotes about Kirienko, himself. Irina Hakamada and Kirienko have permanent discussion groups and virtual communities on their pages; visitors can read questions to and answers from politicians, talk to each other, and suggest new forms of communication. On these pages, one can find not only articles (written by the politicians) and their biographies from other media, but also stories about them, told by the members of their families and their friends. These websites contain real photo albums, which tell stories about the private lives of “real” people. Politicians’ websites that score around the average are the ones by Lebed (158) and Nemtsov (160).

We also evaluated websites of several Russian movements. The server of Pamyat (Memory), Russian Orthodox Monarch National Movement, scored best (156). The most remarkable element of the site is a photo collection of the Russian Orthodox icons, a library of books devoted to Russian history, and a collection of Russian church and folk music.

If we look at the best and worst individual scores of the websites through the subcategories of Participation Friendliness, we see the following picture. In the
Information category, Yabloko got the highest score (56), while the Democratic Union Party received only 2. Other scores are distributed rather unequally between different websites. In the Interactivity category, two personal political websites (those of Hakamada and Kirienko) got the highest score (60), followed by Yabloko (58). At the same time, the Democratic Union received only 2 points in this category; two other websites, the NDR and Revolutionary League, had 3 each. Kirienko's website also scored the highest (60) on the topic of User-friendliness, while the Russian Christian Democratic Party got only 1 point. In the Aesthetics category, the Liberal Democrats and Lebed’s personal website received 56, while the Democratic Union got only 8. If we look at the distribution of average scores between different PF categories, we find that the Aesthetics and User-friendliness categories are the most prominent, scoring an average of 35. They are followed by Information (30.5) and Interactivity (25.5).

Poland

Political websites in Poland scored 58 points on average. Poland has the highest number of “dead” sites. Most of them were used during previous parliamentary/presidential election campaigns and were not updated subsequently. Polish websites hardly use any channels of interactivity. Electronic correspondence devices, self-presentation possibilities for citizens, and forums/discussion groups are rarely found. There is one site that has relatively good scores compared to the others; the Polish People's Party (PSL) (131). It is the only site that contains any navigation/investigation help. The other sites belong to the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SDRP) (67), Conservative People’s Party (55), Christian Democracy of the Third Polish Republic (50), Movement for the Republic and Patriotism (45), and Solidarity Electoral Action (42) as the coalition of centre-right forces, the heiress of the famous Polish trade union “Solidarnosc” headed by the first Polish president, Lech Walesa. The lowest scores are for the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland (17), which is a right-wing European-oriented party with roots in the Polish independence movement.

Looking at scores of individual websites in different categories, we see that the Polish People’s Party scored the highest for all categories, with 40 for Information, 12 for Interactivity, 46 for User-friendliness, and 33 for Aesthetics. By contrast, the Movement for Reconstruction of Poland scored the worst for all categories, with 6, 2, 1, and 8 points, respectively. The average distribution of scores through different PF categories is similar to that in Russia, although it is much lower. Aesthetics scored the highest (19), followed by User-friendliness (17), Information (16), and Interactivity (6).

Former Yugoslavia

As mentioned earlier, dramatic events in Yugoslavia during Spring 1999 conditioned our choice of this Central European country. We wanted to see whether
the Internet was used by political forces in the country under such special crisis circumstances. We looked at the websites of the six main political parties in the country: New Democracy, Serbian Socialist Party, Serbian Renewal Movement, Democratic Party, Civic Alliance of Serbia, Congressional National Party, New Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and the Serbian Unity Congress.

The average score of Yugoslavian political parties is rather high (139). It is mainly achieved through the Aesthetics and User-friendliness categories, with a majority of the websites displaying extensive photo reports from the war and providing their visitors with different tools for searching and navigating. For example, the Serbian Unity Congress website contains numerous links to political/governmental/independent media websites all over the world to give people access to different viewpoints. They also introduced an interesting interactive service where people can send their questions and suggestions not only to the party members, but also to members of the parliament and even to the American president and vice president. Several Serbian websites also introduced fast news service, mainly to update users on current military developments, new targets, and war casualties.

The average score for Yugoslavian parties is 139. The Serbian Unity Congress received the highest score (208), followed by the Congressional National Party (181). The latter is a right-wing Serbian party, headed by Serbian professors and other representatives of the intellectual elite. Further websites that received above-average scores were the Serbian Socialist Party of Slobodan Milosevic (162) and the Democratic Party (158). Party sites that scored below the average were the New Communist Party (123), the Civic Alliance Serbia (97), New Democracy (96), and the Serbian Renewal Movement (81).

In the Information category, the Congressional National Party received the highest score (54). New Democracy scored only 5. The Serbian Unity Congress scored the best in the Interactivity and User-friendliness categories (39 and 60, respectively). The Congressional National Party also got 60 for User-friendliness. The Civil Alliance of Serbia got the lowest score for Interactivity (4) and the Serbian Renewal Movement received the lowest score (24) for its User-friendliness. In the Aesthetics category, the Serbian Socialist Party of Slobodan Milosevic obtained the highest score (56), while New Democracy scored the lowest (37).

The average distribution of scores through different PF categories is similar to the first two CEE countries we analyzed. Aesthetics scored the highest average (45), followed by User-friendliness (43), Information (36), and Interactivity (15).

Ukraine

In the Ukraine, we discovered five political websites for our analysis. Three of them are websites of political parties (Hromada, Edyna Rodyna, and Zeleni) and two are the personal websites of famous national politicians (Olexander Moroz and...
Evhen Marchuk). In former times, Hromada was the second strongest opposition party in the Ukraine (after the Communist Party of Ukraine), but it lost popularity since the 1998 parliamentary elections due to a criminal process initiated against its leader, Pavlo Lazarenko. The Green Party (Zeleni) resembles Western Green parties. It has a large number of seats in the parliament and proclaims that it will do its best for the ecological future of the country and that it will stay independent. Three other sites had been newly created because of the approaching presidential elections in the Ukraine. Two of these sites are personal websites of the presidential candidates (Moroz and Marchuk), the third one (Edyna Rodyna), is a party website intended to present one more presidential candidate, namely its leader, Olexander Rzhavsky.

On average, political websites in the Ukraine scored 103. Overall, the use of the Internet by the Ukrainian political parties is similar to the Polish case. Political websites are mainly created and used there during elections. Hromada and the Green Party of Ukraine are good examples of this. Both sites were created before the last parliamentary elections in the Ukraine and were not subsequently updated or changed. These sites received the lowest scores: Hromada (76) and the Green Party (64). Both personal websites of the politicians have become the country's best websites, with Marchuk’s scoring the highest (137) and Moroz second (127). These sites are doing quite well with presenting diverse information about politicians, but they are disappointing in terms of interactivity.

The following results were achieved in the separate PF categories. In the Information category, the Moroz (45) website scored the highest and the Green Party (9) the lowest. Interactivity is poorly represented at the Hromada website (2). The website of Evhen Marchuk scored the highest (16). Both Marchuk and Edyna Rodyna scored the highest (32) in the User-friendliness category, with Zeleni (17) lowest. Aesthetics is managed best on the Moroz website (52), while the Green Party was lowest (17).

The distribution of average scores between different PF categories differs slightly in the case of Ukraine compared to other CEE countries. Although Aesthetics is again the best scored category (38), it is followed by Information (29), then User-friendliness (25), and Interactivity (11).

**Key Findings**

Over the considered period (Spring 1999), the scores for Participation Friendliness of the political websites in CEE countries range from 139 (Yugoslavia) and 127 (Russia) down to 103 (Ukraine) to 58 (Poland). No website reached the maximum score of 240. The best websites were the Russian sites of the politician Kirienko (221) and the party Yabloko (207) as well as the Yugoslavian site of the Serbian Unity Congress Party (208).

Also the Information category scored less than half of possible points with an average of 28 for all countries. Scores for Information range from 36 (Yugoslavia),
31 (Russia), and 29 (Ukraine) to 16 (Poland). While the subcategory “General boulevard information” scored weakly, “Self-presentation” was pretty well presented. Interactivity (actually introduced in our research as the paramount category) is the weakest one, with average scores of only 14.5. Scores range from 26 (Russia), 15 (Yugoslavia), and 11 (Ukraine) to 6 (Poland). Several websites offer nothing beyond their read-only-service. Electronic correspondence and especially chats/forums are unknown for the majority of the parties' websites or remain scanty at present. Equally average for all countries were the criteria for User friendliness. User friendliness scores ranged from 43 (Yugoslavia), 35 (Russia), and 25 (Ukraine) to 17 (Poland); all the CEE countries together reached an average score of 30. The Aesthetics category refers to visual appeal, design/structure, symbols/propaganda, and pictures. Scores ranged from 45 (Yugoslavia), 38 (Ukraine), and 35 (Russia) to 19 points (Poland). All websites (except those from Poland) differed in the form of visual appeals, but managed to achieve a satisfactory level. They present their sites with a consistent layout; separated “personal,” “party,” and “external” issues visually; they used pictures and text in a balanced way. Only the subcategory “humor” was usually absent on each site. Regarding the assumption that citizens will only use political websites if they are efficient and easy to use/navigate and if the content is current, the key findings in this category are disappointing. But at least Russian and Yugoslavian websites put news about the situation in Kosovo as the main subject on their site during the conflict. Each of these websites contained a political position and a party declaration on this question. Nothing like this could be found on Ukrainian and Polish websites. The hyperlinks between websites were varied (concerning diversity), but most of them provided links to the government of the country, the parliament, or foreign parties with the same political orientation. Remarkable is the fact that several Russian and Yugoslavian parties created digital libraries, giving citizens a chance not only to look through their catalogue of publications, but also to read and print many of the books and articles using PDF files.

Unfortunately, only a minority of the politicians/political parties is using the possibilities of the Internet to its full potential. Although Russia is the winner concerning the “proper” use of the Internet among CEE countries (Yabloko for parties; pages of Hakamada and Kirienko for all websites), Russian sites still offer limited opportunities to connect the electorate with their representatives. There is also a lack of self-presentation possibilities for citizens. All parties see self-presentation as the main reason for their appearance on the websites. But self-presentation is realized very narrowly. That is, in general, there is information about party history, activities, documents, congresses, etc. Links to other pages include only the pages of fellow parties within the country and abroad, under the name “addresses of our friends.” Visual attractiveness is understood from the position of party symbols and propaganda. Humor is absent almost everywhere. Biographies of party leaders are serious and “dry.” Only Yavlinsky has some
comments from his friends and relatives about his childhood. Moreover, only two out of eight parties use the interactive channels of the Internet in an appropriate way. This low level of interactivity can have diverse reasons: first, parties have not yet realized this magnificent opportunity on the Internet; second, most of them are afraid of a torrent of feedback/criticism from citizens; and third, they are unsure about how to deal with it.

All the politicians’ sites are friendly and not very politicized. They invite visitors to consider and communicate with them as a “normal” person, instead of merely politicians. Therefore, the main aim of the private websites of Russian politicians can be characterized as a desire to present their “human face.” All Yugoslavian websites are current and favorably compete with the Russian sites when it comes to quality and amount of information. They also have the highest level of personalization. Nevertheless, they share the same weakness as the remaining sites: low level of interactivity, lack of humor, and general boulevard information. The Ukrainian websites have more in common with the Polish sites concerning the reasons and goals of their use. Actually, most CEE sites were created during the last election campaign. While Russia and Yugoslavia try to update them and even change their appearance occasionally, Polish and Ukrainian politicians use the sites for elections alone. They seem to have forgotten about them thereafter.

Among the political websites, the ones of individual politicians are more “open” for contacts with citizens. However, such websites exist only in Russia and the Ukraine; they are completely absent in Poland and Yugoslavia. At the same time, the Ukraine and Poland have the highest number of “dead” sites. (This means the sites that are used in the pre-election period are not updated afterwards.) The read-and-just-write service is the most commonly used interactive element. Another practice of many parties is to give a direct answer to citizens’ questions on the websites, themselves.

**East-West Comparisons**

This analysis was aimed at discovering features of the Internet used by political parties in Europe. At the same time, we also wanted to see whether any considerable differences exist between the political Internet in Western and Eastern Europe. In very general terms, our results show that the Internet is used by diverse political forces throughout Europe. There seems to be no connection between the use of the Internet and the political position (right, central, or left) of a party or group. Similar to their Western European colleagues, CEE political parties are familiar with the new medium and its exploitation for political needs. What is common for all countries and parties across Europe is the use of the opportunities the Internet provides as an additional channel to influence and attract the voters. However, the Internet means used for this aim by Western and Eastern European political actors differ in their quality and intensity. We believe that our assessment
scheme clearly shows these differences in Internet use. It has not come as a big surprise that all Western European countries perform on average much better throughout different Participation Friendliness categories (Figure 3). There are more than 100 points difference between the country with the best average score for political websites (the Netherlands) and the one with the worst (Poland). At the same time, there is only 12 points difference between Germany and Yugoslavia. Paradoxically, a personal website of Russian politician, Sergey Kirienko, got the highest score (221) among all the websites we analyzed. However, there are also many CEE websites which scored less than 10 in different categories. Moreover, the category of “dead” websites seems to be a rather Eastern European “phenomenon.” Thus, while certain political websites can compete with Western colleagues, the average score for the East is lower.

It is also worth considering differences in the priority given to different PF categories in East and West. While Information is undoubtedly the most prominent PF categories for Western political websites, Aesthetics is the most prominent category for Eastern political websites, with Information coming third as a rule (with the exception of the Ukraine). It can be concluded that Eastern European politicians consider visual attractiveness and broader, symbolic, and visual language to be as important as (or even more important than) the printed word. Such an approach may be related to very recent political transformations in the CEE countries, each country’s search for a new identity, and quest for united national factors. In this respect, prominence of the same category (Aesthetics) in the case of Germany compared to two other Western countries seems to be particularly interesting.

Practically all European political parties experience one common challenge: to use the interactive possibilities provided by the Internet. For many proponents of greater political participation, deliberation, and strong democracy, interactivity is the very feature which distinguishes the Internet from other mediated forms of politician-citizen communication. Via interactive communication, an almost equal dialogue can re-emerge between citizens and politicians and a stronger sense of accountability can be re-established. However, Interactivity has become the weakest category for both EU and CEE political websites. The low level of interactivity can be explained in several ways. We believe that politicians may fear or be unwilling to display any other than their own opinions on the Internet. They may not even be fully aware of the Internet’s possibilities nor recognize the importance of interactive dialogue. It is also true that online communication is time- and means-consuming. It may even require additional personnel involvement on a permanent basis. Additionally, many political actors (particularly in CEE countries) may not have sufficient financial funds for such activities. Moreover, many CEE parties may have simply not yet developed any particular communication strategy since the average age of these parties is 10 years. As a result, many politicians choose the easiest way and use the Internet as they use
any other mean of communication and propaganda. However, it is very important to stress that there are two Russian personal websites which have scored 60 in the Interactivity category and one party’s site merited 58.

Our particular focus on political websites in Yugoslavia was provoked by the desire to see whether conditions of political unrest and military crisis may affect the use of the Internet by political parties. If we are to evaluate the use of the Internet by Yugoslavian political parties in one word it would be “creative.” The political unrest and military aggression has forced politicians to use all information means available to them. Yugoslavia got the highest average score among CEE countries. Its political websites were filled not only with up-to-date information and impressive photo collections, but also they developed many rather successful and user-friendly applications. It is constructive to imagine for a while in which conditions (the war) Yugoslavian parties used their websites appropriately to support their positions.

Finally, two CEE countries (Russia and the Ukraine) presented us with a new type of political websites which we have not been able to find/identify in other European countries. These are personal websites of prominent politicians. In addition to the fact that such websites promote political personalization online, they have become the most effectively developed websites in Eastern Europe and have reached the levels of the Internet use for politics similar to those in the European Union countries.

Conclusions

We are aware that our explorative analysis will leave some open questions and can only provide a general overview. We hope to inspire future examinations to look more closely at how and why people access and use political websites and to base the design of a website on thorough consultation with its potential users to find out more about their needs and wishes as well as difficulties encountered when visiting the website.

Some suggestions for a higher “participation-friendliness” are the following:

- Maintain a greater focus on users’ needs in site design and content (e.g., develop and organize the site content around user groups, provide content in relevant community languages).
- Help users determine the legitimacy of the information and the consequences of their use of the site (e.g., provide the name of the agency, responsibility for content, disclaimer, date of last review or update, detailed and user-friendly information on privacy, security).
Figure 3: Participation friendliness (PF) of 1999 political websites in various European Union and Central and Eastern European countries: average for each country.
• Exploit the interactive capacity of the web for participation in government processes (e.g., provide features for two-way communication between individual members of the public, community groups, business and other organizations, and government agencies).

• Improve accessibility to site content for all users, including those with disabilities and those with less advanced technology and skills (e.g., provide a text equivalent for all non-text elements and provide alternatives to high level technology).

• Make sure representatives adapt their work practices so that they can manage these new additional channels of connection with the public. All jobs are conducted within structures; if the structure does not adapt to accommodate new technologies, there is no point in blaming those trapped within it.

• Develop e-democracy into an integral part of representative democracy. To do this, we must devise mechanisms for promoting public deliberation, embedding it within the constitutional process, and demonstrating real links between public input and policy outcomes. Citizens will soon tire of contributing their thoughts if no apparent account is taken of them.

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References


Chapter 8

The Internet Upholds the Powers That Be

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) innovations and the Internet in particular transform society and politics a good deal. ICT and the Internet also change political socialization because political elites and middle-level political actors use the Internet for political information, communication, persuasion, and mobilization. These political Internet messages reach a growing number of citizens who rate the credibility of Internet information quite high. They also consider the Internet a convenient, attractive channel for political information. Whether political websites achieve their desired effects cannot easily be assessed. We invited young people to participate (under clinical laboratory conditions) in a 40-minute political party website surfing/browsing session. Time spent on the sites is considered an important condition to measure the influence of political party sites. Our goal was to explain observed variance in the amount of time our subjects spent on political party websites. The independent variable was the variance in sites’ quality. All 10 quality indicators refer to two motivation stimuli: self-efficacy and curiosity. To avoid distortions in our analyses due to unequal distribution of party preferences, we weighted the data for party preference. The hypothesis that the higher the site quality, the longer the site is used could not be falsified: users respond positively to higher-quality sites.

Political Socialization

Political socialization is the whole of those processes and structures through which people develop particular political behaviors and acquire particular political orientations, including political behavioral intentions, emotions, attitudes, opinions, beliefs or perceptions, and knowledge. “Processes” include the ways in (and the conditions under) which people receive, process, and more or less accept political messages. “Structures” include the sources/channels and contents of their informative and affective political messages. “Through” means influence. Political socialization research aims to answer the question: What are the origins of individuals’ political behaviors and orientations (i.e., how and due to the influence of whom or what do people develop and perform political behaviors and acquire their personal political orientations)? Political socialization research helps to explain the establishment, maintenance, or change of polities, policies, and politics. Political systems, policies, and political processes are influenced by and are dependent on the acquisition, continuity, or change in the political behaviors and orientations of their members, subjects, and participants. These are, themselves, mainly the effects of political socialization processes (Dekker, 1991a, b).

The so-called intellectual elites may have an independent, critical contribution to political socialization, but they may also help the political elites legitimize their
personal preferences and policies. The various individual agencies and the socializers within them possess a relative autonomy. To understand individuals’ socialization, we must study all possible socialization agencies and socializers active therein (Farnen, 1993; Washburn, 1994; Niemi and Hepburn, 1995; Sigel, 1995; Farnen, et al., 1996, 2000; Conway, 2000).

Theoretically, the most influential messengers for information, feelings, and emotions are the ones who first exert influence on the subject with respect to the object under investigation (e.g., grandparents, parents, peers, television programs), who exert influence for the longest period of time (e.g., parents, best friend, spouse), whose credibility the subject believes to be the highest (e.g., parents, teachers, television news), who have the most power over the subject (e.g., parents, teachers, spouse, employer), who have most power to prevent oppositional influences from other socializers (e.g., parents, elites), and who have the most resources and skills to influence and manipulate the subject (e.g., elites in cooperation with public relations and political advertising and marketing experts).

The new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the Internet in particular have changed politics and society a great deal (Hill and Hughes, 1997; Holmes, 1997; Street, 1997; Hague and Loader, 1999; Barney, 2000). One of the benefits over traditional media is that digital hypermedia allow for a greater volume of information to be transmitted across space at faster speeds; the Internet practically eliminates the barriers of time and place. Another of its benefits is the integration of audio, video, graphic, and textual information, including datasets, interactive graphs, and movies. Another important difference is that the web is a solicited method of communication. The targeting is automatic because those customers interested in political information will visit the site. E-mail allows political elites to transmit a great volume of information across space at faster speeds to multiple recipients with minimal costs. Have ICT and the Internet also changed political socialization? Does the Internet have an influence on users’ political behaviors and orientations? There can only be a political socialization “influence” when there is a political message, when that message reaches the individual, and when that individual is receptive to the message. We explore this topic next.

The Internet and Politics

ICT, the Internet, and the World Wide Web particularly enjoy a growing interest among political elites and middle-level political actors (Barber, et al., 1997; Connell, 1997; Horrocks, et al., 2000). In many countries, the head of state, government, ministries, parliament, individual members of parliament, political parties, interest groups, and (opposition) socio-political movements have one or more websites. All urge citizens to visit them on these sites. Norris (2000) used common search engines to gage the amount of politics occurring on the Internet and monitored the frequency that eight common keywords are found. The terms
“computers,” “sex,” and “television” proved the most popular keywords. “Politics” came next, slightly outweighing “movies,” “religion,” and “investing.” One in 10 sites referred to “politics.” This probably represents a conservative estimate of political sites because many of them are indexed under other terms such as government, parliament, elections, political parties, and interest groups.

Heads of state and governments/administrations use the Internet as an additional agency of political information, public relations, and public diplomacy. Web-enabled government substantively changes public administration across all advanced industrial countries (Prins, 2001). Dunleavy and Margetts (2000) state that informatization of government and public administration makes central control and manipulation of populations potentially much easier (Macpherson, 1998).

Parliaments also distribute many different types of information directly and simultaneously: the daily agenda for parliamentary business, complete versions of official documents (such as the full text of pending legislation and government reports), streaming audio-visual feeds of debates in the legislative chamber, and political education spreads for teachers and students. Members of Parliament have a home page and e-mail address to “keep in touch,” “meet,” and influence their voters and possible future supporters. As of April 1, 2000, parliaments in 101 countries have established their presence on the Web (57% of the total number of parliaments). While Europe leads the way with 87% of its national parliaments operating websites, Africa lags behind with a mere 33%. The overall number of parliaments with websites has nearly tripled within two years (Inter-Parliamentary Council, 2000). Critical evaluations of current practices point to their relatively poor quality (e.g., features for searching, feedback pages, MPs’ personal web pages and e-mail contact addresses are missing) (Norris, 2000; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2000). Moreover, many MPs foolishly do not respond to constituents’ e-mails (Meeks, 2000).

Internet voting is being integrated into the electoral process. The goal is increasing voter turnout. People will not have to make separate trips to an election site to cast a ballot. This means easier registration, no traveling costs, and less time. Moreover, Internet voting is expected to spark the interest of people who are not so much attracted by politics and bring them into the electoral process. However, there are some serious technical and social problems that need to be solved to ensure the security and reliability of the voting process (Gibson, 2002). The 2000 Arizona Democratic primary election was the first binding Internet election to ever occur. While turnout was small, it was substantial. It demonstrated an increase of 575% over 1996; Arizona had the highest percentage increase in turnout in Democratic primary elections. Voting methods (preference for Internet voting versus voting through mail in advance or via machine or paper balloting on election day) was moderately associated with education, income, and age; Internet voting is more popular among well-educated voters, those coming from higher income households, and younger voters. Ideology, “race,” gender, and location of residence
failed the test of statistical significance. Logistic regression analysis showed that age and education contributed most to the voting method decision, while income was not a significant predictor (Solop, 2000). There is also some speculation that Internet voting may favor US Democrats because Republicans have always had a very high turnout rate, despite the fact that more people are registered as Democrats.

Political parties use the Internet for their intra-party and inter-party communication and their interaction with members and possible future members/voters. Party elites have an additional access to their followers to convince them of particular views. The Internet allows smaller parties more opportunities to get their messages across. They can compete on an equal footing with the major parties to communicate their message to the wider Internet electorate. New members are recruited from categories that are less reached by the traditional media. Parties can invite non-members to take part in Internet discussions to start building a relationship with these possible future members.

Parties have invested heavily in online campaigns. Although accurate figures are not available, it is estimated that the three parties in the UK (by 2001) have put over a million pounds of their funds into websites, e-mail campaigning, and associated new media innovations (Crabtree, 2001). An important element is image marketing and management. Now, leaders like to show off their computer skills to convey an image of a modem, computer-literate leader. Opponents spread online rumors that can keep the accused away from governing; “dirty” Internet tricks and e-“smear” campaigns hurt leaders’ and candidates’ images. The Internet allows candidates for public office and parties to disseminate quickly retrievable and up-to-date information without interference or “mediation” (e.g., by critical journalists). Instead of merely trying to influence, direct, and manipulate the traditional media, political parties now also go directly to voters with their online efforts.

Parties have new opportunities to raise funds for their campaigns. Partisans are invited to actively participate in the campaign via the Internet. Some parties offer voters the opportunity to make “your own party homepage” (e.g., “your own Gore homepage” in 2000). They provide texts on the party and/or candidate; users can choose from links files what they want to send by e-mail to their own separate distribution lists. Friendly partisans are also invited to order campaign materials.

Political party websites share many elements. All three main parties in the 2001 parliamentary election campaign in the UK had a homepage with identifying features; the party manifesto/program; information about the candidates; daily news stories; full versions of speeches; cartoons, screen savers, and posters to be downloaded; calendars of events; invitations to contact and interact with the party via an online e-mail form or e-mail address to join the party and donate money; and a password-protected area for party members (a members-only “extranet”), including downloadable campaign material, graphics, and advice on how to respond to voters’ questions about the day’s events and news.
2001). There were also clearly identifiable differences. Each site of the three main parties in the UK during the 2001 parliamentary election campaign had one or more unique elements. These included Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), games, audio/video clips (of press conferences, interviews), live interviews (for which site users could use e-mail for questions), pop-up boxes (a small screen that “floats” over a site page, drawing one’s attention to particular content or to solicit members), and online petitions (Coleman and Hall, 2001). Party sites also differed in sophistication (Earnshaw, 2001) and level of interactivity (e.g., whether the e-mail is answered, answered late, or specifically answered) (Hansard Society, 2001). Differences in the overall quality of party/candidate campaign sites in the US by 1996 and 1998 positively correlated with campaign resource level (Sadow, 2000; Sadow and James, 2001).

Social-political movements (human rights defenders, environmentalists, anti-globalists, but also terrorists, anti-democrats, racists, anti-Semitic, sexists, and anti-gays) use Internet opportunities to inform and mobilize fellow citizens on a neighborhood, local, regional, national, and even global scale. The Internet gives today’s activists an information-gathering network that their predecessors lacked. “Bearing witness” webcam reports alarm and mobilize their viewers. A “NetStrike” consists of a massive and simultaneous access to the same website until it can no longer bear the demand and becomes unavailable. “Rogue” (joke or cyber-squatter) sites try to undermine the effectiveness of their original sites. An increasingly important (and probably effective) grassroots tool is the e-mail petition. In this case, the organization writes the text to make it easier for people to contact their representatives in parliament and other public officials. There are online grassroots calendars where any political group can post its calendar in a centralized location for free and that notify activists when events are added to calendars which interest them. A new technique is to use e-mail to propose grassroots lobbying efforts which then employ handwritten and mailed previously-prepared text to ensure the message will be properly weighed in the representatives’ office, where a canned e-mail would not be so highly valued.

ICT and the Internet have also affected the traditional socialization agencies such as mass media and school. Many traditional mass media have developed an additional Internet version (e.g., CNN.com). There are new online news “papers” and weeklies and daily political news and commentary sites. ICT and the Internet have also affected schools and political education (Filzmaier, 2001). Internet political education projects aim to narrow the political digital gap and to improve political competence and interest (for examples of projects, see the politeia.net site of the Politeia Network for Citizenship and Democracy in Europe). NGOs and private organizations provide services to voters and aim to help select a party/candidate in elections, to make informed political choices, and to notify them about relatively simple but important practical matters such as when, where, and how to vote. Online voter guides offer information about the various parties and
candidates (e.g., their biography, qualifications for office, policy statements, speeches, and previous performance on fulfilling election promises). Voter guides offer clear voting advice. After answering questions about the relative importance of issues and about the user’s own issue opinions, the computer links the user’s opinions to party programs and informs the user about which party comes closest to his/her opinions (a voter matching site). In the US in 2000, youth were able to participate in a national (non-binding) online election for president (see the youthevote.com site). In Germany, young people could vote for state and federal parliament parties (see the Juniorwahl.de site). In the Netherlands, young people could vote for parties in the national parliament (see the publiek-politiek.nl site).

Since there can only be political socialization “influences” from the Internet when there are political messages on the Internet, when these messages reach the individual, and when that individual is receptive to the messages, we may conclude that the first requirement is met. Political elites and middle-level political actors use the Internet for political information, communication, persuasion, and mobilization. But now we must ask, do these messages reach many individuals and are they receptive to them?

**Political Internet Sites and Citizens**

How many people have Internet access? Never before did a new communication medium evidence such a fast growing number of users as has the Internet (Bell and Tang, 1998). However, only 7% of the world’s population (mostly in the West) uses the web (Sussman, 2001). In most EU countries, less than half of the population uses the Internet. In Autumn 2000, on average, 26% of EU citizens used e-mail and/or the Internet. Use varies greatly among the 15 EU member states (from 61% in Sweden to 11% in Greece). Managers are most likely to use the Internet and/or e-mail (61%), followed by people who left full-time education at the age of 20 or older, and people who are still studying (both 57%). It is lowest among the elderly; only 4% of retired people use it (European Commission, 2001). There is a digital divide due to the costs of Internet access and/or becoming computer literate in the linguafranca, English. Not all users are frequent visitors. There are more “sensors” (who prefer the real over the virtual) and “hoppers” (who pop in and out of the Internet) than “assimilators” (who absorb the Internet into their lives). “Sensors” fear that the Internet holds its users back from social interaction, do not believe the Internet is the final authority for information, think it is easier to call or go out to shop, are irritated with the abundance of information available online, and do not like junk mail (Lee and Anderson, 2000).

How many citizens see the Internet as an important source of political information? In the US, low (though growing) percentages of Internet users say they view the Internet as very or somewhat important as a source of information about elections. In the presidential election of 2000, half of the Americans viewed the Internet as very (19%) or somewhat (32%) important as a source of information
about the election. The figures among actual Internet users are higher (very = 23%, somewhat = 41%) (American University, 2000). In the UK, many fewer Internet users say they are “certain” or “likely” to use it to find information about the election (respectively, 2% and 13%). More than 8 in 10 express no interest in using the Internet during the election: 39% are “not likely” to use it and 45% will “definitely” not use the Internet (Crabtree, 2001; Industrial Society, 2001a).

How many citizens have in fact accessed the Internet for information about politics? In the US, low (though growing) percentages of Internet users say they have actually accessed the Internet for information about politics. In the 2000 presidential election, nearly 1 in 5 Americans said they went online for “election news,” compared to fewer than 1 in 10 during the 1996 campaign (Pew, 2001). One-third of the Americans who use the Internet said they obtain information about “politics, candidates, or political campaigns” online. Veteran online users (who have been online for at least three years) were far more likely to get election news (45%) than Internet “newbies” (who began going online in the past six months) (17%) (American University, 2000). Two-thirds of the youth ages 12 through 17 have searched for news online (Lenhart, et al., 2001). Interest in US online campaign news peaked around election day; fully 12% of Americans went online for political news on November 7, 2000. That figure rises to 28% among those who voted on November 7 (Pew, 2000a). Users do not spend much time on political websites: in the presidential election year 2000, more than half of US Internet users who accessed information about politics, candidates, or political campaigns have spent no more than one hour doing so during a “typical” week (53%) (American University, 2000). In the UK, another 1 in 5 respondents who had access to the Internet used it for any 2001 election-related activities. Young people were much more likely to use the Internet to find out about politics than older citizens (Coleman and Hall, 2001).

Why do people use the Internet? The Internet’s main appeal is as a campaign news source. It is its convenience that motivates, rather than a desire to tap new or different information sources because users were not getting all the news they wanted from traditional media (respectively, 56% and 29%) (Pew, 2000a). Why do people not use the Internet for political information? A self-evident primary cause is no access to the Internet. Second, people are largely ignorant of political Internet content. Third, people have negative perceptions: they think political information online is aimed at party activists, not at them. Fourth, people do not feel they have the ability to make use of the Internet and its political content. Fifth, people feel they are already overloaded with information on the election. There is no evidence that gender and socio-economic status have an influence on using or not using it. If voters do search for political information, popular expectations are often reversed; they are likely to find the Internet a useful political tool and prefer it to much offline media (Crabtree, 2001).
What are people doing on and with the Internet when it comes to politics and public affairs? Most political Internet users are likely to use it to get information about various issues and candidates (respectively, 36% and 35%) rather than to communicate or chat with others about issues (19%), forward voting-related information via e-mail (17%), communicate or chat with a candidate (7%), donate money to a candidate (5%), or volunteer for a campaign (5%) (American University, 2000). Another study made clear that when it comes to politics and public affairs, Internet users turn to e-mail more than the web. They also prefer humor to action; more than half of Internet users say they have sent or received e-mail jokes about the candidates or campaign (George Washington University, 2000). Political website users are partisan information seekers and/or issue-oriented seekers, but also uncertain information seekers who follow a visual attraction strategy or a browsing strategy (Kern, et al., 1999). In the UK, voters who consider using e-mail during the election are also likely to discuss the election with friends and family, but avoid parties and politicians. Whereas 32% said they might send e-mail to friends or family about the election and 34% said they might send a joke, fewer than 10% said they would e-mail a candidate, party, or politician (Crabtree, 2001).

What kinds of websites are used? Focus group participants in the Just, et al. (1997) study visited many sites. They spent much of their time at such sites. In 2000, the American campaign sites were used much less frequently than other media-sponsored sites (Pew, 2001). In the UK, traditional news media sites (such as the BBC website) also are the overwhelming choice for reliable information about the election. Political party websites are significantly less popular; only a third of those who considered using the Internet to find information about the election thought they would visit a national political party site. However voters who do search for political information online favor information on policy presented by parties online to offline (Crabtree, 2001). It is difficult to obtain data about the numbers of visitors to party and candidate websites. Most of the party and candidate sites have removed their counters (which would indicate how many hits the sites were receiving) or have simply hidden or not installed them. The few remaining counters (and anecdotal data from campaign managers) indicate that there were not too many hits overall (Dulio, et al., 1999). One of the reasons for relatively low party website hits is that low (though growing) percentages of Internet users access the Internet for political information in general. Another reason is that the voters habitually prefer mediated content that is mostly provided by traditional media. A third reason is that political party websites are hard to find; the web is “about as well organized as a bookstore after a hurricane” (Toulouse, 1998, p. 3).

How do users evaluate political websites? In general, users are pleased with their political Internet experiences. The reasons that US focus group participants gave for liking their experience with the Internet were that the Internet provides access to a lot of information, the experience is interesting (“exciting,”
“fascinating,” “appealing,” and “fun”), the web is easy to use, it offers diverse views, and it is accessed quickly. The comments that participants gave about the web were that there was not enough information or that it was not current, reliable, or interesting. Inexperienced users found the Internet slow (Just, et al., 1997). In general, Internet users prefer websites of major news organizations as sources of political information. For election news, CNN.com received the highest percentage approval of any website tested; those users rated that site as very useful. Just over one-third of online users who visited the Bush/Cheney and Gore/Lieberman sites (respectively 7% and 6% of online users) found them very useful (Pew, 2001). In the UK, voters who search for political information online seem impressed with the medium and its usefulness. They are likely to be critical of parties and candidates without an Internet presence, are highly demanding in terms of web content and are extremely critical if their demands are not met. These voters express consistent and definite preferences for styles of web presence and content. They have little tolerance for amateurish websites (Crabtree, 2001).

One might think that the low percentages of Internet users who say they are certain they will use the Internet to get election information has something to do with a possible low rating for the credibility of Internet information. However, available data show the opposite. Credibility (believability) ratings for the online sites of the major national news organizations in the US are substantially higher than ratings for the news organizations themselves. The figures for ABCNews.com and ABC News were 44% and 29% respectively, for CBSNews.com and CBS News 41% and 27%, for USAToday.com and USA Today 37% and 21%, and for FoxNews.com and Fox News Channel 34% and 21%, respectively (Pew, 2000a). A possible explanation for this important phenomenon is that people consider information more credible the more they have personally (experienced or) looked for or found it. In Arizona, more than half of adults supported Internet voting being added as an option to all future Arizona elections. Younger people, higher income earners, and more well-educated people expressed stronger levels of support for Internet voting there (Solop, 2000).

How do users estimate the effects of their using political websites? Most focus group participants in the Just, et al. (1997) study believed they learned something about politics from their Internet experience. After people experience using the Internet for voting (e.g., in Arizona), many more Internet voters said they would be more likely to vote if Internet voting was an option in future elections (Solop, 2000). A growing number of US online election news consumers say online election news affected their voting decisions (1996: 31%; 2000: 43%). This subjective effect of online campaign news has been particularly pronounced among young people. Half of the online election news consumers under age 30 say the information they received made them want to vote for or against a particular candidate (Pew, 2000b). However, only 6% of those UK voters who were online said that the Internet was very or fairly important in providing them with
information that helped them determine their vote. More younger (17%) than older people (5%) reported this subjective Internet influence upon their vote (Coleman and Hall, 2001). UK voters who search for political information online are likely to judge political parties by their Internet presence. They felt that their image of the party/candidate with the “best” site had improved their image of the party/candidate. The reverse was also true: bad sites translate to a bad image. Having a “bad” website can be a dangerous liability for parties (Crabtree, 2001).

In short, (almost) a majority of the population in industrialized countries uses the Internet. A small, though growing, minority regularly accesses Internet information about politics. Political website users are partisan and issue-oriented, but also uncertain, information seekers. They prefer websites of major news organizations as sources of political information, compared to political party and campaign sites. Credibility ratings for the online sites of news organizations are substantially higher than ratings for the news organizations themselves. Voters who search for political information online are likely to be critical of parties and candidates without Internet presence, are highly demanding in terms of web content, and are extremely critical if these demands are not met. We may conclude that political Internet messages reach a small, though growing, number of citizens and probably influence these citizens’ political behaviors and orientations. They rate the credibility of Internet information quite high and consider the Internet a convenient and attractive channel of political communications. It is worth our effort to study the Internet in the context of political socialization (Groper, 1996; Ward and Gibson, 1998). Crucial research questions relate to the intended and unintended effects of political Internet activities. How much influence do political websites have on their users? How can we explain variance in this influence?

**Political Party Websites and Their Effectiveness**

Our empirical study focuses on political party websites. We selected sites of political parties because parties are integral to the operation of political systems. Moreover, elections are the very heart of democracy and voters vote for a party list in many countries; the list system is the most common method applied in proportional representation systems. The elector votes for a party and its list of candidates, rather than for a single candidate. The research project aimed to answer the question: How can we explain observed variance in effectiveness of political party websites?

Whether political party websites are effective and have their desired effects cannot easily be assessed. Behavioral effects are the least complicated to measure (e.g., the number of e-mails sent by users, orders to send a printed party program, and new membership enlistment). Much more difficult to measure is the sites’ influence on political knowledge, beliefs, opinions attitudes, emotions, and behavioral intentions, including party preferences. The main reason for this is that one
cannot easily isolate the site’s effects from the effects from other political socialization agencies.

Our study is based on the assumption that for any effect and influence, the site needs to be used for at least some time. The longer a site is visited, the more stimuli the user probably receives and the higher is the chance that the desired effects are actually reached (Briggs and Hollis, 1997). A relatively long visit time is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for such influence. Time spent on the site is just one (albeit important) indicator of success. Other scholars have used the number of pages read as the dependent variable. However, this number is not easy to observe in a reliable way due to the use of “frames” (two pages within one page), the presence of pop-up windows, and other factors.

How do we explain variance in time spent on political party websites? Why is one website used longer than another? We hypothesize that there is a lot to the quality of the site: a higher quality website is used longer.

What makes for high quality? To answer this question, we apply the Hypermedia Interaction Cycle and the Psychological Model of the Internet-User developed by Fredin (1997) and Fredin and David (1998). Here, the key question is: what intrinsically motivates the user to stay at a particular website? What drives people to continue with the next interaction with a website?

The Hypermedia Interaction Cycle model is an iterative, self-regulatory model that captures the dynamics of hypermedia interaction from a user’s perspective. In many ways, it is based on Bandura’s 1989 general social learning theory regarding motivation and self-efficacy. It has two dimensions: cycle stages and motivational components. A cycle is the period between leaving a main menu (e.g., a menu on a home page) and returning to a main menu after a successful or failed search. There are three cycle stages: preparation, exploration, and consolidation. The preparation phase includes making a choice from a menu of options. The user makes an estimate of a good choice, taking into account his/her goals. The exploration phase starts when the choice has been made and the user is presented with a variety of information. The consolidation phase occurs when the user reached his/her goal or failed to do so and has decided to try another option. Then the cycle starts again. The time spent on a website is longer the more cycles are started and the longer the cycles are.

Motivation has two components: goals and self-efficacy. Goals motivate by providing the potential of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction). Goal foreshadowing occurs during the preparation phase of the interaction cycle, while goal evaluation occurs during the consolidation phase. Goal evaluation includes the degree of success in finding something good and the degree of liking what was found. Self-efficacy is the conviction that one can do what is required to accomplish a particular outcome (Bandura, 1989). In the preparation phase, the self-efficacy factor is confidence in finding something specific to the immediate task at hand (e.g., useful information). In the consolidation phase, the self-efficacy factors are
Confidence in finding other interesting information and the degree of surprise with the information found. Self-efficacy is supported by a high quality of the site’s information and technology. Surprise is an emotion, resulting from the violation of expectations; it has immediate effects, including motivational ones. Goal conditions and self-efficacy factors act in a cyclical pattern. Achieving a goal strengthens self-efficacy, while self-efficacy, in turn, affects goal foreshadowing.

The three key words in the Psychological Model of the Internet-User are “self-efficacy,” “curiosity,” and “flow.” Self-efficacy is the sense that one can do what is required to accomplish a particular outcome. Curiosity (i.e., the goal is to know more) is raised by stimuli that are novel, somewhat complex, and surprising or ambiguous. In the presence of such stimuli, people may arrive at serendipitous experiences (i.e., emotionally satisfying discoveries). Moreover, emotional satisfaction derived through curiosity often leads to further curiosity. Self-efficacy and curiosity contribute to arriving at a state of flow. Flow is “a state of often intense concentration” and “the experience of exercising control in a complex, difficult activity.” It gives an intrinsic motivation because in flow, the reward for achieving a goal, is largely intrinsic; performing the action well is largely its own reward (Fredin, 1997, pp. 5-6; Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). A person in a state of flow often forgets the time; if a state of flow ends, one is embarrassed about not knowing the real time involved. Self-efficacy, curiosity, and flow result in self-sustaining actions, which, in their turn, motivate the user to spend more time on any site that encourages these feelings of satisfaction. Websites have a higher quality the more they strengthen the user’s feeling of self-efficacy, the more they evoke curiosity, and, as a result, the more they provide a strong sense of satisfaction or the feeling of “flow.”

What site characteristics strengthen the feeling of self-efficacy, evoke curiosity, and provide flow? The relevant literature suggests several different quality indicators (Fredin, 1997; Just, et al., 1997; Day, 1997; Schneiderman, 1997; Buchanan and Lukaszewski, 1997; Fredin and David, 1998; Lu and Yeung, 1998; Nielsen, 2000). We selected 10 of these indicators. The first indicator is the first impression the home page of the site makes upon its users. A positive first impression of the site is expected to evoke curiosity. The second indicator relates to the site’s appearance/looks and includes layout (e.g., symmetry and visual elements such as colors, illustrations, typeface, and background). A visually pleasing (attractive) site is expected to evoke curiosity. The third indicator relates to site content. The content can be more or less informative, relevant/useful, up-to-date and fresh, reliable and objective, easily accessible (thanks to a clear structure, short paragraphs, and summaries), made to measure, and interesting. The higher the quality of the information the site offers and the more understandable the information is, the more the site strengthens one’s feeling of self-efficacy. The fourth indicator relates to the site’s navigation opportunities. A clear and consistent navigation menu throughout the entire site (including frames, “hyperlinks,” and a
search feature) will help the users to find their way and, as a result, will give them a feeling of self-efficacy. Speed of downloading is the fifth indicator. Waiting too long for site content to download annoys the user. A “ speedy” site satisfies the user’s feeling of self-efficacy. The sixth indicator relates to interaction opportunities, allowing for two-way communication and vital feedback. Thanks to interaction with the site owner/maker, fellow visitors, and/or with elements of the site itself, the user may make fortunate and surprising discoveries that strengthen his/her curiosity. The next two indicators are the presence of video fragments and audio snatches. Opportunities to watch video or to listen to spoken words or music are expected to evoke curiosity. The ninth indicator is the number of missing elements. The more a site offers the things the users are looking for, the more the site is expected to strengthen the user’s feeling of self-efficacy. The tenth indicator is the number of elements that do not function well. Possible examples are “ links” to pages that are absent or “ back” keys that do not function due to “ automatic referral.” Ill-functioning elements are expected to undermine the users’ self-efficacy.

The Experiment

To explore the relationship between times spent on political party websites and their quality, we invited young people in the Netherlands, aged 18 to 21, to take part in a research study under clinical laboratory conditions in a 40-minute session. This young population had the right to vote in national parliamentary elections for the first time. We also focus on young people because surveys found that the Internet is more likely to be used for political information and discussion among the young and young adults (together with those with higher education degrees and people in higher income categories). We also had to limit our study to party websites from just one country. The Netherlands offers good opportunities for research in this field: its electoral system is a proportional representation system; votes are cast for parties and their lists of candidates rather than for single candidates; there are a large number of political parties; almost all parties have their own website (Voerman, et al., 2002); and the Internet has a rapidly growing number of users.

We recruited participants via a website dedicated to our study and another youth website with a link to our research site. We also publicly displayed posters with a reference to our website. The website and corresponding posters invited youth to participate in “ research into the evaluation of websites.” The word “ political” was excluded purposely to recruit those respondents with low or no political interest. Computer skills and website surfing experience were not required. We wanted to attract other than “ dotcom generation” representatives. We made an appointment with the first 41 youngsters who responded by e-mail. We had to limit the number of participants because of a lack of funds. The number 41 corresponds with the “ n” in Kern’s study, which largely inspired and motivated us to design our
own research project (Kern, 1997; Kern, et al., 1999). The personal reward for participation was 15 Dutch guilders (7 Euros).

The respondents formed a highly selective group. Almost all participants were university or higher vocational education students (38 and 2, respectively); one participant attended secondary school classes. Women were over-represented (27). The average age was 20. Nine participants had no website surfing experience. Almost all intended to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections. A large majority said they had voted for the local council last year and most had a relatively high level of political interest. The various limitations with respect to population and sample size limit the generalizability of our research.

Each session followed a set procedure. Upon arrival at the lab (Leiden University, Department of Political Science), the subjects were given a short briefing. The researcher also provided ample opportunities for participants to clarify their doubts. Then the respondent was invited to write answers for 12 closed-ended questions. These questions tapped, among others: subjective political knowledge, political interest, party preference, party attachment, and voting intention.

After completing the questionnaire, each participant was invited to sit in front of the monitor and keyboard. If necessary, participants were given a demonstration of the basic features and introduced to basic commands. The respondent was told that he/she could make a choice on the websites of six parties (PvdA = Labour Party, CDA = Christian-Democrats, D66 = Liberal-Democrats VVD = Liberal-Conservative Party, SP = Socialist Party, and GL = GreenLeft).

These six sites were the only “bookmarks” available in the browser. Each bookmark referred to the “root” of the site. The bookmark opened either the site’s homepage or introductory page. All participants were presented with the same menu of choices. One could start with any party he/she chose, was free to visit any number of sites, and could revisit a site. One was also free to stay at a particular page as long as the respondent wanted. The only limitation was a maximum allowed computer session time of 40 minutes. In practice, 35 of the 41 participants used all six sites.

The researcher sat behind the research subject; the researcher’s position did make the subject feel he/she was kept under constant surveillance but at the same time, was close enough to help the respondent immediately in case of technical problems and to closely watch the screen. The researcher made notes about the order in which the sites were visited, the site elements that did not function, the respondent’s use of interaction opportunities, and the respondent’s viewing of video fragments and listening to audio snatches. The “Surfing Spy” program made a log file (i.e., an electronic account of activity on the research site) for each respondent. The “cache” included all pages that the respondent downloaded, including all elements such as illustrations.
Following the computer session, a structured debriefing interview was held with the respondent to determine his/her evaluation of the sites’ characteristics. During this interview, we showed the home- or intro-pages of the party sites that the respondent had visited as a memory aid on the screen. The interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes. The interview questions relate to all 10 quality indicators. For the first impression (appearance, contents, and speed), the respondents were invited to give each site a grade between 0 and 10. Next, they were asked for amplification. Regarding missing elements, the respondents were asked whether they thought particular things, elements, or opportunities were lacking and, if so, what they missed. The answer options for the question about navigation were: very clear, clear, not clear, and not clear at all. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The transcripts (in Dutch) are available for review.

We expected that party website use would positively correlate with party preference and party attachment. Respondents preferring party x were expected to use the site of party x longer than respondents who did not prefer party x. Kern, et al. (1999) demonstrated this correlation in the US. In three of the six cases, the correlation between website use (in seconds) and party preference (a dichotomous variable) was statistically significant (sites 3, 4, and 6), while in the other three cases, this significance was almost reached (sites 1, 2, and 5). The Pearson’s r varied from .20 to .50 (site 1 PvdA: r=.21, p=.10, N=39; site 2 CDA: r=.26, p=.07, N=36; site 3 D66: r=.50, p=.00, N=35; site 4 VVD: r=.29, p=.05, N=35; site 5 SP: r=.20, p=.12, N=38; site 6 GL: r=.40, p=.00, N=40; we considered not visiting a site to be a missing value). We also explored the correlation between party site use and subjective political knowledge, political interest, voting intention, and voting or abstention in the past. No correlation was found, with the exception of the time spent on one of the six sites and subjective political knowledge (site number 1; r = .35, p = .02, N = 33). Almost none of the respondents expressed any party attachment.

Party preference was unequal in the group of respondents (site 1 party PvdA: 10 participants; site 6 party GreenLeft: 10 participants; site 3 party D66: 7 participants; site 4 party VVD: 5 participants; site 2 party CDA: 2 participants; and site 5 party SP: 1 participant; no party preference had 6 participants). To avoid distortions in our analyses aiming at exploring the effects of the sites’ quality, we weighted the data for the time spent on the party sites for party preference. To illustrate this weighting, we use the data about the fifth (SP) site, visited by 38 respondents. Out of these, 32 preferred one of the six parties. Out of these, 1 preferred the party SP, while the other 31 respondents who visited the SP site, did not prefer the SP. The data from the 1 SP sympathizer counts much more than the data from the other 31 respondents. In case of an equal distribution of party preference (32 respondents with a party preference/6 parties = 5.333), respondents would have had an SP preference and 32.666 another party preference. To reach an
equal distribution, the data of the SP sympathizer was weighted with \((5.333/1 =)\) 5.333, while the data of the others were weighted with \(((38- 5.333)=32.667/37=)\) 0.883.

**Table 1: Average time spent on six party websites in minutes and seconds (weighted)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Average time in minutes</th>
<th>Average time in seconds</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. Party</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 PvdA</td>
<td>7'39&quot;</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 CDA</td>
<td>6'45&quot;</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 D66</td>
<td>6'27&quot;</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 VVD</td>
<td>6'11&quot;</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 SP</td>
<td>5'41&quot;</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 GL</td>
<td>4'45&quot;</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The average time spent on the six party websites differed considerably. The first site received longest attention. The difference between the time spent on this site and the second most popular site was almost one minute. The shortest time was spent on the sixth site. The difference between this site and the site on the next to final place in the rank order was also almost one minute.

We made 2-by-2 comparisons to determine whether the sites statistically significant differ with respect to average time. The same weighting procedure was followed for the comparisons of two sites. To illustrate this, we use the data about the first (PvdA) site and fifth (SP) site. In total, 36 participants visited both sites. Out of these, 31 preferred one of the six parties. In case of an equal distribution of party preference (31 participants/6 parties=), 5.167 participants would have had a PvdA preference, 5.167 participants a SP preference, and so forth. In reality, there were 9 participants with a PvdA preference and 1 with a SP preference. To reach an equal distribution, the data of the PvdA sympathizers were weighted with \((5.167/9 =)\) 0.574, the data on the SP sympathizer with \((5.167/1 =)\) 5.167, and the data of the others with \(((36-5.167-5.167)=) 25.666/26=)\) 0.987. The 2-by-2 comparisons show that the differences in five combinations are statistically significant (t-tests, \(p<.05\)). Four clusters can be identified: first, the first site to which more time was spent than the fifth and sixth sites. Second, the second, third, and fourth site to which more time was spent than the sixth site. Third, the fifth site to which less time was spent than the first site. Finally, the sixth site to which less time was spent than the first, second, third, and fourth site.
Table 2: Difference in average time spent on six political party websites in two by two comparisons (weighted)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Websites (A)-(B)</th>
<th>Average time spent to A</th>
<th>Average time spent to B</th>
<th>Average time difference</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P (two-way)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-6 PvdA-GL</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 PvdA-SP</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4 PvdA-VVD</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-6 CDA-GL</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5 CDA-SP</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6 D66-GL</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6 SP-GL</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Average scores for 10 characteristics of six party websites (weighted)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>First impression</th>
<th>Appearance</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Navigation</th>
<th>Speed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 PvdA</td>
<td>7.2 (38)</td>
<td>7.5 (39)</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>(39)</td>
<td>7.4 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 CDA</td>
<td>7.3 (36)</td>
<td>7.3 (36)</td>
<td>7.3 (34)</td>
<td>3.4 (36)</td>
<td>8.1 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 D66</td>
<td>6.6 (35)</td>
<td>6.5 (35)</td>
<td>6.9 (34)</td>
<td>2.7 (35)</td>
<td>7.7 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 VVD</td>
<td>6.8 (35)</td>
<td>7.0 (35)</td>
<td>7.3 (32)</td>
<td>2.8 (34)</td>
<td>7.5 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 SP</td>
<td>6.6 (38)</td>
<td>6.6 (38)</td>
<td>6.4 (38)</td>
<td>3.0 (38)</td>
<td>7.7 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 GL</td>
<td>6.2 (40)</td>
<td>6.0 (40)</td>
<td>6.7 (38)</td>
<td>2.8 (40)</td>
<td>7.6 (39)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We used the 10 indicators mentioned previously to measure respondents’ evaluations of the websites' general quality. Average grades were counted for respondents’ first impression of the site plus its appearance, contents, and download speed (using a 1-10 scale). The navigation assessment is the average level of clarity (using a 1-4 scale). Interaction, video, and audio are measured as the average number of times respondents used the opportunities. For the missing elements and those not functioning well, we counted the average numbers. We weighted the data about the individual indicators the same as for the average time spent at sites. Some indicators received clearly different average scores for the
various sites (e.g., appearance varied from 6.0 to 7.5). Other indicators received almost the same average scores (e.g., average number of audio fragments the respondent listened to). In general, sites on which respondents spent the longest time also received high quality scores. The low time score for the GreenLeft site is also coupled with low quality scores.

The general quality of a party site is the sum of the average scores for the first seven characteristics, minus the average scores for the last two indicators. We excluded the average numbers of audio fragments the respondents listened to because they were extremely low for all six sites. For example, one respondents’ scores were: (first impression: 8 + appearance: 7 + contents: 6 + speed: 5 + navigation: 2 + interaction: 2 + video: 1 -) 31 - (missing elements: 1 + not well functioning elements: 1-) 2 = 29. Together, the nine indicators formed a reliable scale (Cronbach’s alpha .70; N = 6 party sites). The first two sites received the highest scores; the third, fourth, and fifth sites were in the middle, while the sixth site appeared last.

Table 4: Average general quality scores for six party websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 PvdA</td>
<td>31.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 CDA</td>
<td>32.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 D66</td>
<td>29.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 VVD</td>
<td>30.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 SP</td>
<td>30.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 GL</td>
<td>28.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 2-by-2 comparisons showed that the differences in eight combinations were statistically significant. Four out of the five combinations of sites that differ in time they were visited by the participants also differ with respect to the evaluation of the general quality (1-6, 1-5, 2-6, 3-6). The remaining combination of sites (4-6) differs with respect to the time they were visited, but not with respect to the evaluation of the general quality. This may be due to the relatively small number of respondents that answered all relevant questions for these two sites (n = 25). Four other combinations of sites also differ with respect to general quality, but have not differed in the time they were visited by the participants (2-3, 2-4, 2-5, 3-1). The remaining six possible combinations of two websites (which are not mentioned in Table 5) do not differ with respect to time or to general quality (1-2, 1-4, 3-4, 3-5, 4-5, 5-6).

There is a strong correlation between the average time spent on a party website and its average score for quality (Pearson’s r .80, p .03*, n = 6). Quality explains 63.7% of the variance in average time spent on the sites. This analysis relates to six cases: the six party sites. There are 12 scores: six scores for the dependent variable (i.e., the average time spent on the six sites) (see Table 1, third column) and six
scores for the independent variable (i.e., the average quality score for the six sites) (also see Table 4). Note that we do not use the 41 subjects as the cases to be analyzed because we do not intend to explain differences among these subjects. Rather, we want to explain differences among the six party sites. The conclusion is that the higher the quality of the site, the more time the participant spent on it. There are a few combinations of sites that do not fit in this pattern (e.g., the 1-2 sites) (Figure 1). The first site received more time from the subjects than the second site, although the latter received a higher quality score. The second site scored higher than the first site on only two out of the nine indicators: navigation and speed. It may be that some quality indicators are more important than others (e.g., appearance and content compared to navigation and download speed).

![Figure 1: Correlations between the average times spent (in seconds) on political party sites and average score (range of 27-33) for their quality](image)

"Figure 1: Correlations between the average times spent (in seconds) on political party sites and average score (range of 27-33) for their quality"
Table 5: Difference in general quality between six political party websites in two by two comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Websites (A)- (B)</th>
<th>Average quality score for A</th>
<th>Average quality score for B</th>
<th>Average quality score difference</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>P (two-way)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-6 PvdA-GL</td>
<td>32.02</td>
<td>27.75</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 PvdA-SP</td>
<td>32.33</td>
<td>30.28</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 PvdA-D66</td>
<td>32.24</td>
<td>29.60</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-6 CDA-GL</td>
<td>32.46</td>
<td>28.25</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5 CDA-SP</td>
<td>32.52</td>
<td>29.92</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>.02*</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 CDA-VVD</td>
<td>33.26</td>
<td>31.01</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.01*</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 CDA-D66</td>
<td>33.30</td>
<td>30.17</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>.00*</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6 D66-GL</td>
<td>29.55</td>
<td>27.89</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>.04*</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 VVD-GL</td>
<td>30.42</td>
<td>28.29</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our comments address three main points, each related both to the limitations of the present work and to directions for future work. First, we had to limit our study to party websites from just one country (the Netherlands). That country’s electoral system is a proportional representation system. Future comparative research should include party sites from other countries with the same proportional representation system and sites from countries with plurality, majority, and mixed electoral systems. Second, we expected a positive correlation between the amount of time spent on party websites and the subject’s party preference and party attachment. We found empirical evidence for the positive correlation between party site use and party preference. Almost none of the respondents expressed any party attachment. No correlation was found between party site use and subjective political knowledge, political interest, voting intention, and voting or abstention in the past (with the exception of the time spent on one of the six sites and subjective political knowledge).

The absence of correlations might be explained by the absence or low level of dispersion of values for these variables. In turn, this is caused by the selective composition of the group of subjects. In future studies, a random sample (of youth and young adults) may allow us to better analyze such correlations between party website use and party attachment, political knowledge, political interest, voting intention, and voting behavior in the past. Third, we gave all quality indicators the same weight in our analysis. There are some indications that users consider appearance and content more important than navigation and speed. In our study, both appearance and content were covered by just one indicator. More specific appearance indicators may relate to typeface, colors, and background. More specific content indicators may be the sites’ levels of comprehensibility and conciseness. We may obtain a higher percentage of explained variance in time spent on party sites by weighting quality indicators differently and using more specific appearance and content quality indicators.
Epilogue and Conclusions

There are two competitive hypotheses about the overall political influence of ICT on representative democracies. First, the ‘mobilization thesis’ predicts that ICT will facilitate forms of direct democracy, allowing more opportunities for citizen decision-making (initiatives and referenda), grassroots mobilization, and community organization. ICT reduces the need for indirect representation (Macpherson, 1998). ICT will contribute to shrink the distance between politics and citizens. Political Internet activities will strengthen citizens’ political competence and activism. In April 2001, I received an e-mail ‘View from the Harvard Yard: It Is a Revolution’ from Phil Noble, President of PoliticsOnline and Resident Fellow of the Institute of Politics at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. The message was “More than ever, I am convinced that the Internet is causing a revolution in politics and government. We may only be at 10am in the morning on day one of the revolution, but it is here. It is happening now.”

Second the ‘normalization hypothesis’ predicts that the major traditional offline institutions and interests (such as governments, strong political parties, established media, and corporations) will increasingly dominate the Internet (Coleman and Hall, 2001). Core political institutions and middle-level actors will be thereby strengthened (Norris, 2000). The gap between political elites and large groups of citizens will widen due to a growing digital divide. Access to the Internet will be sharply uneven because economic and technological resources/access and computer skills are unequally distributed, creating an information underclass. Offline inequalities are being replicated in cyberspace (Resnick, 1998).

Third, a separate version of the normalization hypothesis says that new computer networks are an essentially conservative technology that strengthens the prevailing liberal and capitalist global order. Computer networks produce greater elite control over citizens, tighten the screws, and make global economic and political elites richer and more powerful. Computer networking is the Trojan horse for democracies; it is the ultimate capitalist tool due to its predominant control function (Barney, 2000).

But “revolution” is probably an incorrect term; the Internet has transformed politics, but it is currently not a medium that destroys or replaces existing political systems and their power distributions. ICT seems to support the maintenance of pre-existent basic power structures (Bovens, 2003). Autocracies are helped by economic growth due to ICT (Taubman, 1998; Hachigian, 2001; Sandschneider, 2001). Representative democracies (which suffer from a serious crisis due to lowering election turnouts) may be helped by Internet voting because it may bring young first-time voters (who have consistently low rates of election turnout) back into the electoral process.

ICT offers more opportunities to political actors who have more power and financial resources (among other power factors) to buy Internet management.
expertise, but with an interest in maintaining the status quo. There is also reason to speculate that parliaments will lose influence and power to ministries and public agencies that have more expertise in managing Internet activities. Private companies may also acquire more political influence thanks to their ICT resources and expertise.

At the moment, there seems to be more evidence for the stability thesis than the revolution thesis and more evidence for the normalization thesis than the mobilization thesis. Political socialization in existing political systems plays fundamentally a conservative role; the status quo is maintained. Individuals are led to develop actual behaviors and orientations that are according to, and fit into, the existing political culture and system. The two Internet sites which received the longest participant/subject attention in our research belong to the major Dutch political parties. The shortest time was spent on the oppositional political party site. The first two sites also received the highest quality scores, while the oppositional site arrived in last position. Parties with many members have more financial resources to buy website expertise. ICT and the Internet particularly offer new opportunities for promoting the classic stability and supportive nature of traditional political socialization.

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