Good News for the Future? Young People, Internet Use, and Political Participation

Tom P. Bakker[1] and Claes H. de Vreese[1]

Abstract

The role of traditional media and the Internet in relation to young people's political participation has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Starting from a notion of differential media use and an encompassing notion of political participation, this article tests the relationships between media use (newspaper, television, and Internet) and offline and online forms of political participation. Findings from a national survey (*n* = 2,409, age 16 to 24) reveal that a variety of Internet uses are positively related with different forms of political participation, whereas the relationship between most uses of traditional media and participation are weak, albeit positive. The study rejects the predictive power of *duration* of media use but finds support for the *type* of media use. Positive relationships between online communication and noninformational uses of the Internet vis-à-vis participation are found. The research demonstrates how a wider and more contemporary conception of political participation, together with more detailed measures of media use, can help to gain better insight in the roles media can play in affecting participatory behavior among the Internet generation.

Keywords

Internet, political participation, media use, youth

Introduction

Much research on youth and politics from the last decade shows increasing detachment of younger people from politics. Most discussions revolve around declining political interest,

[1]University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam

Corresponding Author:
Tom P. Bakker, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, Kloveniersburgwal 48, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Email: T.P.Bakker@uva.nl

dropping participation, and low turnout at elections (e.g., Delli Carpini, 2000; Phelps, 2004; Pirie & Worcester, 2000). Although the assumption that political participation among the young has been low for a long time is generally accepted, the role of the media in affecting (non)participatory behavior has become particularly interesting with the ever-growing popularity of the Internet among younger people and the possible effects of the new medium. The use of new media for political ends in the United States was visible during the 2008 U.S. presidential elections. President Obama actively and successfully employed social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as communication tools, capitalizing on the heavy use of the Internet for political activities by younger people (Smith & Rainie, 2008). Also, in most Western European countries there seems high potential for the Internet, considering the high usage levels over the last few years (Eurostat, 2009) and the continuing debates on decreasing participation levels among youth.

A considerable amount of research is already available on the ways the Internet affects civic or political involvement. Although findings have sometimes been inconclusive, recent studies acknowledge that Internet use is not a unidimensional concept and thus does not—if at all—affect all groups in society similarly; rather, its effects depend on a complex combination of personal and social characteristics, usage patterns, and the specific content and context of the medium. More specifically, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) have shown that modeling specified Internet use (as opposed to "overall Internet use") as a predictor of social capital worked best for younger generations (people under 35 in this case). Similar arguments about differential effects have earlier been made concerning the effects of watching television (McLeod & McDonald, 1985; Norris, 1996).

A plethora of both specific and generic terms have been used to cover diverging forms of civic and political involvement, ranging from *social capital* (e.g., Putnam, 2000), *civic literacy* (Milner, 2002), and *political* and *civic engagement* to more concrete terms like *membership*, *political knowledge,* and *turnout*. In this article, we focus on *political participation*. In a comprehensive overview, Delli Carpini (2004, p. 396) defines political participation as part of a wider notion of "democratic engagement" which includes most of the terms mentioned above. While confining ourselves to politics, we claim that the understanding of political participation should not be limited to institutional and traditional ways. The definitions and boundaries of political participation have been subjects of discussion for decades (for an early overview and discussion, see Conge, 1988), but contemporary research simply cannot ignore online ways of participation. This article focuses on offline and online political participation in the Netherlands. Just like in the United States and many other Western European countries, Internet usage among Dutch youth is very high, while at the same time there are debates about declines in participation. Our study finally aims to generate general insights into the role of specific uses of the Internet in affecting participatory behavior among the so-called Internet generation.

A Closer Look at Decline in Participation

Historically, the participation of citizens in the political process has been considered a crucial element for a functioning and healthy democracy. Irrespective of the various changes in the social and political landscape on both international and national levels during the last decades, the significance of participatory behavior of citizens is at the core in several key works on democracy (e.g., Held, 2006). In the light of this alleged importance, serious concerns have been raised over the rate of political participation among young and future generations. Recent reports from western countries show low or decreasing levels of participation. However, questions arise if *all* forms of political participation are declining or if the existing literature is biased by a disproportional focus on institutional and limited measures of participatory behavior. As—among others—Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) have made clear, political participation has several dimensions, is changing over time, and requires different levels of input of time, money, and skills. It may well be that participatory acts that require a substantial amount of input in offline settings are more accessible and attractive for some people when they can be carried out in an online context (e.g., sending an e-mail to a politician is faster, cheaper, and easier than sending a letter).

Some suggest that it is not so much the levels of interest or participation that are being challenged but rather the attitudes toward politics that are changing. For example, younger people are thought to be more skeptical and to show more political apathy (e.g., Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002), something that should not be equated with nonparticipation or disengagement. Younger people may form a new generation that is less attracted by traditional forms of political engagement (Phelps, 2004; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Such assertions have led to a call for a broader and more contemporary notion of political or civic participation (Dahlgren, 2000; de Vreese, 2006; Dunleavy, 1996; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005; O'Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones, & McDonagh, 2003; Phelps, 2005; Russell, 2004; Verba et al., 1995) and to look beyond established and institutional measures of participation like party membership, attendance at political meetings, or voter turnout. Taking a broader approach, Zukin et al. (2006) concluded that "simple claims that today's youth (. . .) are apathetic and disengaged from *civic* life are simply wrong" (pp. 188-189).

The Internet is a natural medium for alternative and digital ways of political participation. It offers—potentially—new modes of easily accessible, low-cost forms of participation. The web and all other online applications are heavily used by younger people. For example, in 2007, the average level of Internet use[1] in the 27 European Union member states was 60%, whereas this was 88% for the age group of 16 to 24, peaking at 99% in the Netherlands and 100% in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland (Eurostat, 2007). In the United States, younger people also belong to the group of heaviest Internet users. While in May 2008 the overall percentage of Internet users[2] among the adult American population was 73%, this percentage was 90% for the age group 18 to 29 (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). The Internet offers a wide scope of possibilities to engage in political activities like visiting political blogs, researching political information, following online

news, participating in forums, discussing politics by e-mail, or organizing electronic petitions.

There have been divergent expectations about the development of the Internet and how it may affect certain aspects of civic and political life. Supporters of a so-called utopian view not only praise the wide-ranging technical possibilities but also commend the social potential of the Internet to increase political engagement and participation. Followers of a more dystopian view consider the Internet more as a social threat, disconnecting people from "real" life (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2002) or even endangering key elements of a healthy democracy (Sunstein, 2001). Many empirical studies from recent years, however, have not found evidence for either strong positive or negative effects of Internet use on (offline forms of) political engagement (see Boulianne, 2009). Nevertheless, as we shall see, studies that have included more specified forms of Internet use in their model were able to shed more light under what circumstances, or for which audience, effects actually *do* appear.

Media and Politics: An Unclear Relationship

The notion that media, including the Internet, serve multiple functions and leads to different effects is commonly adopted in the field of political communication. A range of studies—usually employing multivariate analyses—have addressed the relationships between particular uses of the Internet and forms of political and civic engagement (e.g., Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Tolbert and McNeal (2003), for example, found that being exposed to election news on the Internet increased the probability that people would vote during the 1996 and 2000 U.S. presidential elections, leading to the idea that the Internet has a mobilizing potential. Focusing on civic engagement, Shah et al. (2001) showed that "information exchange" on the Internet was a better predictor than "overall Internet use." Xenos and Moy (2007), however, show that positive effects of online news on engagement are higher for people with more political interest, and, also, Bimber (2003) argues that mainly already politically engaged citizens benefit from the Internet's potential.

The rapid growth of Internet use and the alleged declining levels of political involvement of younger people have made the relationship between these two a popular and much debated issue. New media may well challenge the role or fill some of the gap left by traditionally strong socializers such as family, church, and school. Especially, the role played by parents for their children as key socializers with regard to politics is changing. In the past decades, trends of increasing individualization and volatile electoral behavior are observed (Dalton, 2002). Although traditionally parents were stable voters and played an important role, they are now increasingly becoming floating voters and losing ground as political socializers. Taking this development into account, media in general, and the Internet in particular, are becoming more central in the process of affecting participatory behavior. As Delli Carpini (2004) notes, "As one of several socializing agents, the media provide much of the 'raw material' that make up social and political beliefs, attitudes, and schema" (p. 408).

Looking first at the role of "traditional" news media, newspaper use repeatedly proved to be positively related to various forms of civic and political engagement. Eveland and

Scheufele (2000) showed that reading newspapers positively impacted political participation and voting, and Weaver and Drew (2001) found positive relationships between paying attention to campaign news in newspapers and voting (see also McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele, 2002). Jeffres, Lee, Neuendorf, and Atkin (2007) showed that readership of newspapers was positively related with different forms of community activities and social capital. Also, television news use, although less consistently, has been found to—directly (Norris, 1996) or indirectly (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005)—impact political participation in a positive direction.

The impact of news consumption has also been tested in online contexts and showed similar positive relationships. Tolbert and McNeal (2003) showed that using online news increased voting probability, and Quintelier and Vissers (2008) found that consuming online news positively related to political participation among teenagers, while both studies included a large set of control variables (see also Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah et al., 2005) We therefore hypothesize, ceteris paribus, the following:

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1):* News consumption via newspapers, television, and the Internet is positively related to political participation.

Besides news use, discussing politics with family or friends is considered an important factor as regard to political participation. Various studies have convincingly linked political discussion with participatory behavior (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; McLeod et al., 1999; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000) and knowledge (Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Thomson, 2006). Parallel to the relationships between *offline* discussion and participation, positive associations have been suggested between *online* discussion and political knowledge and participation (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Price & Cappella, 2002). This leads us to our second hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2 (H2):* Interactive online communication is positively related to political participation.

Although there seems to be wide agreement on the potential benefits of Internet use, some have argued that time spent on the Internet (or watching television) reduces the available time to engage in meaningful civic and political activities (Nie & Erbring, 2002; Putnam, 1995, 2000), a process that is generally referred to as *time displacement*. These assertions, however, have been countered in other research (e.g., Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donavan, 2002).

Because of the high development pace of the Internet and the phenomenon's relative newness in social science, research approaches and findings vary widely and theories on the potential effects of the new medium are neither too stable nor convincing. Although scholars agree on the assumption that the Internet leads to differential effects for different types of users, recent research on the relationship between media use and politics is still very limited in the examination of the multidimensional relationship between Internet use and political participation. Previous research (Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006) acknowledges the varied functions media can serve, but the multidimensional character of

the Internet in analyses is often overlooked. Although most researchers aim at determining the role that media play in younger people's lives with regard to political participation, for the most part solely informational uses or general indicators (e.g., web use, e-mail) are taken into consideration with regard to Internet. Limited specification of Internet use in survey research may lead to scholars to underestimate the actual magnitude of Internet effects (see also Boulianne, 2009). We argue that given the high level of Internet use among younger people along with their diverging usage patterns, the multidimensional character of the new medium deserves greater attention. Following this need to specify the type of use and online activity, we hypothesize the following:

> *Hypothesis 3 (H3):* Specified media usage is a stronger predictor of political partici-pation than time spent with a medium.

Another often overlooked but important aspect when tapping political or civic partici-pation is the various digital possibilities the Internet offers to engage in political activities, which then leads to the expectation that intensive use of the Internet does not *necessarily* lead to decreased participation. As noted earlier, the Internet can be used to be politically active in various ways (visiting political websites, discussing politics in discussion forums, signing online petitions) and requires different levels of skills or energy. Moreover, many online activities, like signing petitions or sending political messages, have also been mea-sured in an offline form (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999; Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Given the popularity and relative ease of online political participation, such activities should not be neglected when measuring participatory behavior. However, taking into account the theory of time displacement, increased online participatory behavior may lead to lower levels of offline participation. Given the centrality of the Internet among younger people, we therefore hypothesize the following:

> *Hypothesis 4 (H4):* Internet use is a stronger predictor for newer forms of political participation than traditional forms.

Our last expectation relates to intrinsic preferences toward specific media content. Prior (2005) proposes a measure of relative entertainment preference (REP), which is aimed at understanding the political implications of people's preference for news or entertainment content. Prior's results point at a negative relationship between REP and political knowl-edge and voter turnout. For this research, we will focus on the potential link between REP and political participation, to see if this proposition can be extended. We do so—in anal-ogy to our Internet use measures—also to acknowledge that it is the type of use of a medium that matters and not the duration of the use. Our last hypothesis therefore reads as follows:

> *Hypothesis 5 (H5):* There is a negative relationship between REP and political participation.

Method

We designed an online survey in the Netherlands to explore the possible relationships between different media uses and political participation. Ten thousand people in the age group of 16 to 24 were sampled by the marketing company TAPPS. These people were invited by e-mail to fill in the questionnaire. The sampling frame consists of a selection of databases that are composed of different modes of recruitment including both offline and online modes. The survey was administered by the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) in the spring of 2006. To maximize the response rate, the survey was kept relatively short (average response time was less than 10 minutes) and incentives were raffled off among the participants.

An online survey design was chosen, given our key interest in the relationship between different forms of political participation and Internet use patterns. Although online surveys are critiqued for its skewed distributions (i.e., only Internet users), in the Netherlands, Internet access among 16 to 24 years is almost 100%, and our interest is not a comparison between online and offline users. The questionnaire was successfully completed by 2,409 respondents ($M = 19.2$ years, $SD = 2.29$), resulting in a response rate of 24% (AAPOR RR1).[3]

Dependent Variables

Given the high Internet usage among younger people, we tapped two discrete forms of participatory behavior, labeled *traditional participation* and *digital participation*. A factor analysis (principal component analysis with Varimax rotation) yielded two factors for both forms of participation, which we tagged *passive* and *active participation*.

Digital participation was measured by asking people about the frequency they participated in online political activities, ranging on a 5-point scale from *never* to *very often*. Following the factor analysis, the variables *digital passive participation* and *digital active participation* were created, respectively explaining 42% (eigenvalue 3.82) and 12% (eigenvalue 1.07) of the variance.[4] Digital passive participation ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 0.69$) was measured by asking respondents to indicate how often they in relation to politics (1) visited websites of the municipality, (2) visited websites of the government and public administration, and (3) visited websites with political content. The three items showed to be internally consistent ($\alpha = .77$). Digital active participation ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.69$) involved more active forms of participation and was gauged by asking how often the respondent in relation to politics (1) reacted online to a message or article on the Internet, (2) signed online petitions, and (3) participated in online polls. The items formed an acceptable internally consistent scale ($\alpha = .59$).

A similar approach was used to tap traditional participation. For this measure, people again were asked with what frequency (5-point scale, *never* to *very often*) they participated in political activities, but this time in an offline setting. Factor analysis led to the creation of traditional passive participation (explained variance 15%, eigenvalue 1.02) and traditional active participation (explained variance 45%, eigenvalue 3.16). Respondents'

traditional passive participation ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 0.73$) was made up of three items ($\alpha = .63$), asking people how often they (1) retrieved books or information about political or social issues, (2) signed petitions, and (3) followed newspapers and television in election times to learn about politics and political parties. Traditional active participation ($M = 1.21$, $SD = 0.41$) consisted of four items ($\alpha = .75$), asking how often the respondents (1) sent letters to newspapers or magazines to comment on articles, (2) protested or complained by mail or telephone about decisions taken by the government or public administration, (3) participated in demonstrations, and (4) actively engaged in discussions during debates or lectures.

Independent Variables

Media variables. To assess the types of media and media content that respondents usually consume, a set of detailed questions was asked, following Slater's argument (2004, p. 169) that a lack of specified measures of media use could, among others, lead to underestimates of its possible effects. In this article, specificity of media exposure measures is taken into account by assessing uses of newspaper, television, and Internet.

Newspapers. Respondents were asked to indicate how much time they spent reading paid and free newspapers on an average day (in 10-minute intervals), leading to *reading time paid dailies* ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.03$) and *reading time free dailies* ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.84$). Participants were also asked how often (in days) during an average week they read the following newspapers: *AD/Algemeen Dagblad*, *Metro*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *NRC.next*, *Het Parool*, *Spits*, *De Telegraaf*, *Trouw*, *de Volkskrant*, and a regional daily. Additive index scores were created for quality newspapers (*NRC Handelsblad*, *NRC.next*, *Het Parool*, *Trouw*, and *de Volkskrant*; $M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.24$), popular newspapers (*AD/Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf*; $M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.57$), and free newspapers (*Metro* and *Spits*; $M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.90$).

Television. The setup for the television questions corresponded with the design of the newspaper section. First the respondents were asked how long (in 0.5-hour intervals) they watched television on an average day, leading to creation of the variable *viewing time television* ($M = 6.97$, $SD = 2.30$). The respondents then were asked how often (in days) they tuned into different national, regional, international, and thematic channels. A factor analysis revealed two forms of viewing behavior: *public television viewing* (eigenvalue 1.85, explained variance 14.3%) and *commercial television viewing* (eigenvalue 3.98, explained variance 30.6%). Public television viewing ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.73$) consisted of the channels Nederland 1, Nederland 2, and Nederland 3, and commercial television viewing ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 0.66$) was formed by RTL4, RTL5, RTL7, SBS6, Net5, and Veronica/JETIX. Both the public and the commercials channels formed reliable scales (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

An additional measure was used to tap the respondents' relative preference for entertainment- or news-related content on television. The REP is based on Prior's REP (Prior, 2005) and was measured by letting the respondents choose, in five rounds, between their preference for an entertainment program or a news/current affairs program. Consequently, the total amount of choices (five) was divided by the amount of choices for entertainment

programs (ranging between 0 and 5) and a REP ratio was computed between 0 and 1 ($M =$ 0.73, $SD = 0.24$).

Internet. First, respondents were asked how much time they spent online on an average day (15 minutes or less, 30 minutes, 45 minutes, 1 hour, 1.5 hours, 2 hours, 2.5 hours, 3 hours, 3.5 hours, 4 hours, or 4.5 hours or more), resulting in the variable *time spent online* ($M = 6.88$, $SD = 2.64$).

As noted earlier, it is considered relevant to examine not only informational or overall use of media types but rather include detailed measures of media use (Slater, 2004). For example, taking into account the large battery of possible Internet activities, Norris and Jones (1998) distinguish between four different types of Internet users, labeled *researchers*, *home consumers*, *political expressives,* and *party animals*. Shah et al. (2001) discriminated between using the Internet for social recreation, product consumption, financial management, or information exchange (see also Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). In our survey, we presented our respondents with a list of 16 surfing activities and 4 communication activities and asked to indicate how often (5-point scale, ranging between *never* and *very often*) they took part in those activities. After factor analysis, four categories were determined: Internet news use (eigenvalue 1.37, explained variance 8.65%), services (eigenvalue 2.91, explained variance 18.2%), music (eigenvalue 1.99, explained variance 12.4%), and club/organization (eigenvalue 1.10, explained variance 6.9%). Internet news use ($M =$ 2.05, $SD = 0.83$) is the combined measure of visiting newspaper websites, visiting news sites and news blogs, and visiting showbizz news sites ($\alpha = .59$). Services ($M = 2.39$, $SD =$ 0.68) is formed by online banking, job searching, housing sites, looking for product information, holiday bookings, and online shopping ($\alpha = .65$). Music ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.11$) is a two-item measure of downloading music and software and listening music on your PC ($\alpha = .69$). Club/organization ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.31$) is created by asking people how often they visited the website of an organization or club they were a member of. Respondents were also asked how often (5-point scale, between *never* and *very often*) they participated in online communication activities. The three variables were e-mail ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.77$), social networking (chat and online communities; eigenvalue = 1.54, explained variance = 38.5%; $M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.98$), and forum ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.24$).

Control variables. Respondents were asked to indicate their gender (1 = *male*, 2 = *female*) and level of education. A dummy variable was used to check for differences between respondents below and above legal voting age, which is 18 in the Netherlands (1 ≥ 18). Political talk ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.11$) was measured by asking on a 5-point scale, ranging between *never* and *very often*, how often the respondent talked with friends about local or national political issues. Political interest ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.12$) was tapped by asking to what extent people agreed with the statement "Politics is interesting" (5-point scale, ranging between *totally disagree* and *totally agree*). Although both political talk and political interest are generally used as dependent variables, here they were purposefully implemented as control variables in order to provide a conservative test of the four main dependent political participation variables. Political talk and political interest can be expected to account for a considerable amount of the variance in the dependent variables, but inserting both variables in the early stage as control variables can assist in clarifying whether

particular media use explains forms of political participation, while both political talk and interest are controlled for.

Analysis

To test our hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regressions analyses were run for the four forms of participation. The independent variables were grouped into four blocks that were consecutively taken into the regression. The variables in the first block were used as control variables, consisting of gender, legal voting age, education, political interest, and political talk. The second block was formed by measures of *duration* of newspaper, television, and Internet use. The third and fourth blocks were formed by respectively traditional media variables (newspapers and television) and Internet variables.

As already indicated earlier, by using political interest and political talk as control variables, a conservative test could be conducted of the participation measures. Also, entering media duration variables at an early stage allowed us to both test for main effects of media duration use and differential effects based on specified use of newspapers, television, and Internet, helping us to address the expectation (H3) that specified media usage (block 3 and 4) would be a stronger predictor of political participation than time spent with a medium (block 2), with possibly effects weakening or diminishing when participation forms are regressed on all variable blocks in the final model.

Results

When looking at the results of all four regression analyses (Tables 1 to 4), we find support for our hypothesis that specified media usage is a stronger predictor of political participation than time spent with a medium (H3). Almost all initial significant beta coefficients in block 2 (time spent with a medium) vanish when the remaining blocks (block 3 and 4, specified media use) are entered in the third and fourth step of the analysis. Only in the regression model for traditional passive participation, a significant positive association remains for *reading time paid dailies* (Table 1). No significant effects are found for gender and education, except for modest negative significant associations in the model for traditional active participation (Table 2). In the models for active participation (both online and offline), a negative effect was found for legal voting age.[5]

Examining both the traditional media block and the Internet block, we find that using the Internet for news is a positive predictor for all four forms of participation. However, quality newspaper reading only shows significant positive associations with traditional forms of participation (Tables 1 and 2). No or negative effects are found for reading popular or free newspapers (with one exception). Public television viewing (often seen as strongly correlated with news viewing) only proves to be a positive predictor of passive forms of participation, while commercial viewing is not a significant predictor for any type of participatory behavior. Given the systematic positive associations of news use on the Internet and the mixed results of newspaper reading and watching (public) television, we can partially confirm H1 that news consumption via newspapers, television, and the

Table 1. Predicting Traditional Passive Participation

	M1	M2	M3	M4	SE
Control variables					
Gender	.00	.00	.02	.02	.03
Education	.01	.01	.00	.00	.00
Legal voting age	.04**	.04*	.03	.01	.03
Political talk	.55***	.55***	.51***	.48***	.01
Political interest	.24***	.23***	.19***	.18***	.01
Duration					
Reading time paid dailies		.07***	.06***	.04**	.01
Reading time free dailies		−.01	−.01	−.02	.01
Viewing time television		−.01	−.01	.00	.01
Time spent online		.01	.01	−.03	.00
Traditional media					
Quality newspaper reading			.04*	.03*	.05
Popular newspaper reading			−.02	−.03*	.02
Free daily reading			.00	−.02	.01
Public television viewing			.08***	.06***	.02
Commercial television viewing			.00	−.02	.02
Relative entertainment preference			−.09***	−.10***	.05
Internet					
Internet news use				.10***	.01
Services				.06***	.02
Music				.00	.01
Club/organization				.02	.01
E-mail				.05***	.01
Social networking				.01	.01
Forum				.04*	.01
N				2,409	
R^2 change		.004	.017	.021	
Total R^2 (adjusted)	.502	.506	.523	.544	

Note: Entries are standardized beta coefficients and standard errors.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

Internet is positively related to political participation. As expected, respondents' entertainment preference was negatively related to political participation, so H5 can be confirmed.

Looking at the Internet block, a considerable amount of variables are (modest) positive predictors of participation. Concerning surfing activities, particularly news, service, and

Table 2. Predicting Traditional Active Participation

	M1	M2	M3	M4	SE
Control variables					
Gender	−.09***	−.08***	−.06**	−.06**	.02
Education	−.04*	−.04	−.03	−.04*	.00
Legal voting age	−.01	−.02	−.04	−.05*	.02
Political talk	.26***	.26***	.23***	.19***	.01
Political interest	.13***	.12***	.08***	.07***	.01
Duration					
Reading time paid dailies		.06**	.03	.01	.01
Reading time free dailies		.03	.00	−.01	.01
Viewing time television		−.01	−.04*	−.03	.00
Time spent online		.06**	.06**	.01	.00
Traditional media					
Quality newspaper reading			.11***	.12***	.03
Popular newspaper reading			.01	−.01	.01
Free daily reading			.08***	.07***	.01
Public television viewing			.06*	.03	.01
Commercial television viewing			.06**	.04	.01
Relative entertainment preference			−.03	−.04	.04
Internet					
Internet news use				.09***	.01
Services				.09***	.01
Music				−.04*	.01
Club/organization				.03	.01
E-mail				−.03	.01
Social networking				.06**	.01
Forum				.10***	.01
N				2,409	
R^2 change		.007	.026	.034	
Total R^2 (adjusted)	.130	.137	.163	.197	

Note: Entries are standardized beta coefficients and standard errors.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

club/organization are significantly and positively related to most forms of participation. The same tendency is found for online forms of communication. Predominantly significant positive relationships were found between online forms of communication (mainly e-mail and forum use) and participation, supporting our expectation that interactive online communication is positively related to participation (H2).

Table 3. Predicting Digital Passive Participation

	M1	M2	M3	M4	SE
Control variables					
Gender	−.06***	−.05**	−.02	−.03	.03
Education	.02	.02	.01	.01	.01
Legal voting age	.09***	.09***	.08***	.00	.03
Political talk	.31***	.31***	.27***	.20***	.01
Political interest	.27***	.26***	.21***	.19***	.01
Duration					
Reading time paid dailies		.05**	.02	−.01	.01
Reading time free dailies		.02	.02	.00	.02
Viewing time television		.01	−.01	.02	.01
Time spent online		.07***	.07***	.01	.00
Traditional media					
Quality newspaper reading			.02	.02	.05
Popular newspaper reading			.00	−.02	.02
Free daily reading			.01	−.02	.01
Public television viewing			.13***	.09***	.02
Commercial television viewing			.02	−.01	.02
Relative entertainment preference			−.10***	−.10***	.06
Internet					
Internet news use				.18***	.02
Services				.18***	.02
Music				−.04*	.01
Club/organization				.05**	.01
E-mail				.07***	.02
Social networking				−.01	.01
Forum				.06***	.01
N				2,409	
R^2 change		.007	.029	.086	
Total R^2 (adjusted)	.282	.289	.318	.404	

Note: Entries are standardized beta coefficients and standard errors.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

Comparing the predictive power of the Internet block on the four dependent variables, higher amounts of explained variance were found for digital forms of participation (passive 8.6%, active 20.2%) than for traditional participation, supporting H4 (Internet use is a stronger predictor for newer forms of political participation than for traditional forms). However, several Internet variables are also significant positive predictors for traditional ways of participation.[6]

Table 4. Predicting Digital Active Participation

	M1	M2	M3	M4	SE
Control variables					
Gender	−.07***	−.05**	−.04	−.01	.03
Education	−.02	.00	−.01	−.01	.01
Legal voting age	−.12***	−.14***	−.15***	−.13***	.03
Political talk	.31***	.32***	.29***	.22***	.01
Political interest	.03	.03	.01	.01	.01
Duration					
Reading time paid dailies		.03	.02	−.02	.01
Reading time free dailies		.06	.05*	.03	.02
Viewing time television		.03	−.01	.03	.01
Time spent online		.13***	.13***	−.01	.00
Traditional media					
Quality newspaper reading			.02	.01	.05
Popular newspaper reading			.00	−.03	.02
Free daily reading			.04	.00	.01
Public television viewing			.07**	.02	.02
Commercial television viewing			.07**	.03	.02
Relative entertainment preference			−.05*	−.05**	.06
Internet					
Internet news use				.18***	.02
Services				.07***	.02
Music				.05*	.01
Club/organization				.04*	.01
E-mail				.05**	.02
Social networking				.03	.01
Forum				.36***	.01
N				2,409	
R^2 change		.023	.012	.202	
Total R^2 (adjusted)	.123	.146	.158	.360	

Note: Entries are standardized beta coefficients and standard errors.
*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. ***$p \leq .001$.

Discussion

The shortcomings in the communication environment are often highlighted when the shortcomings of today's democratic practices are discussed. The empirical evidence for the negative effects of suboptimal communications is at best mixed and more complex than most assumed relationships (see also Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Tolbert &

McNeal, 2003). This study particularly tackled the relationships between various types of media use and various forms of political participation for the citizens of tomorrow, young people aged 16 to 24. We found that various types of media use are positively linked to measures of political participation. In addition to all kinds of informational uses, noninformational uses of the web (e.g., online communication and visiting nonnews websites) also had positive relationships with diverse forms of participation. With conventional wisdom and much extant research focusing on the *negative* role played by the media in understanding younger people's political participation, this article has shown otherwise. Although high usage of particular (entertainment) media or a total detachment from any news media may indeed be disadvantageous for participatory behavior, a broader look at the use of media is unarguably relevant.

The findings of this study support our expectation that tapping specific uses of newspapers, television, and Internet improves our understanding of the relationships between media use and participatory behavior. Reversely, overall *duration* of specific media use proves to have weak predictive power. This finding is supported in related studies (e.g., Shah et al., 2001). While established positive effects of news use are indeed found in this article, the inclusion of other online activities, like using digital services and engaging in online communication and discussion, also shows positive relationships with most forms of political participation. This augments our argument that most effects of media use on political participation are *positive* in nature.

Moreover, this study extends Putnam's view (2000) that social networks are beneficial to participatory behavior. However, while Putnam, in his work on the building of social capital, stresses the importance of physical presence and reality, we extend this argument to also show that "being connected" online is positively related to both on and offline forms of participation. Although results for the four different forms of participation pointed in the same direction, the strength of associations differed. Forum use, for example, proved to be a much stronger predictor of digital active participation than of other forms, while traditional media use proved to be a (slightly) better predictor of traditional forms of participation than digital forms. Overall, however, several positive associations have been found between use of the Internet and both (digital and traditional) forms of participation, corroborating our expectation that online activities may be equally important measures in research on younger people's participatory behavior.

Although we have found associations between media use and participatory behavior of youth, the cross-sectional setup of the analysis does not permit us to make firm assertions about the causal direction of the relationship. It may very well be that specific media use drives on the intrinsic motivation of people to be politically active. This potentially reverse, reciprocal, or maybe even reinforcing process of media selection deserves special attention in current and future media effects research, using more complex combinations of both cross-sectional and overtime analysis of panel data (Slater, 2007). Longitudinal analysis could also be very useful in revealing cohort effects for different (media) generations. Although an online survey is a very useful instrument regarding our sample (young people) and the subject of this study (Internet use), the online invitations and surveys may have

lead to a somewhat skewed distribution of our sample. Hence, we are unable to make comparisons with youth that are not online or hardly use the Internet and might be active newspaper readers.

While the current study has limitations that should be considered and explored in future research, we have tried to improve the understanding of the varied functions of Internet use and to determine certain online usage patterns of younger people (e.g., consumer-related use, communication, online networking) as potential predictors of political participation (see also Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Shah et al., 2001). The article demonstrates the limitations of research designs that are heavily focused on overall measures of (news) media use, passing over the wide-ranging and diverging uses and usage patterns of active online citizens. In a research field where Internet and younger generations are of key interest, scholars should not limit their approach to only the established offline and institutional ways of participation and media use. When research takes into account both offline and online political participation, including institutional and alternative ways of participatory behavior, a better understanding can be developed of the challenges and changes political participation is really facing in the current millennium.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Internet use is defined as the percentage of individuals who used the Internet in the last year
2. An Internet user is defined as someone who at least occasionally uses the Internet or sends and receives e-mail.
3. While this response rate may seem low, it should be noted that random digit dialing (RDD) samples in the Netherlands typically yield response rates around 30%. Moreover, Krosnick (1999) shows that low a response rate is not per se an issue if the sample is not too far off the targeted population.
4. Our original factor analysis included three additional items, but these were removed because they suffered from extreme positive skewness or did not load clearly on one of the two extracted components.
5. Additional analyses suggest that the negative coefficients appear because of the negative associations with participation for respondents between 22 and 24 years old. Although we are not sure about the cause of this finding, it may be that the participatory acts that were measured become less relevant, interesting or accessible for this group, for example

because of life changes such as working and thus having less free time to engage in participatory acts.

6. We emphasize that our test is rather conservative, given the controls for not only demographics but also for political talk and political interest which account for a large share of the explained variance. The robustness of our findings is augmented by this conservative estimate.

References

Bimber, B. (2003). *Information and American democracy: Technology in the evolution of political power*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Boulianne, S. (2009). Does Internet use affect engagement? A meta-analysis of research. *Political Communication, 26*, 193-211.

Conge, P. J. (1988). The concept of political participation: Toward a definition. *Comparative Politics, 20*, 241-249.

Dahlgren, P. (2000). The Internet and the democratization of civic culture. *Political Communication, 17*, 335-340.

Dalton, R. J. (2002). *Citizen politics: Public opinion and political parties in advanced industrial democracies* (3rd ed.). New York: Chatham House.

de Vreese, C. H. (2006). *10 observations about the past, present, and future of political communication. Inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Amsterdam, Chair in Political Communication*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000). Gen.com: Youth, civic engagement, and the new information environment. *Political Communication, 17*, 341-349.

Delli Carpini, M. X. (2004). Mediating democratic engagement: The impact of communications on citizens' involvement in political and civic life. In L. L. Kaid (Ed.), *Handbook of political communication* (pp. 395-434). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Dunleavy, P. (1996). Political behavior: Institutional and experiential approaches. In R. Goodin & H.-D. Klingemann (Eds.), *A new handbook of political science* (pp. 276-294). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Esser, F., & de Vreese, C. H. (2007). Comparing young voters' political engagement in the United States and Europe. *American Behavioral Scientist, 50*, 1195-1213.

Eurostat. (2007). *Individuals—Internet use 2007*. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/

Eurostat. (2009). *Data in Focus 46/2009, Internet usage in 2009, households and individuals*. Retrieved December 22, 2009, from http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/4-08122009-BP/EN/4-08122009-BP-EN.PDF

Eveland, W. P., Jr. (2004). The effect of political discussion in producing informed citizens: The roles of information, motivation, and elaboration. *Political Communication, 21*, 177-193.

Eveland, W. P., Jr., & Scheufele, D. A. (2000). Connecting news media use with gaps in knowledge and participation. *Political Communication, 17*, 215-237.

Eveland, W. P., Jr., & Thomson, T. (2006). Is it talking, thinking, or both? A lagged dependent variable model of discussion effects on political knowledge. *Journal of Communication, 56*, 523-542.

Hardy, B. W., & Scheufele, D. A. (2005). Examining differential gains from Internet use: Comparing the moderating role of talk and online interactions. *Journal of Communication, 55*(1), 71-84.

Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Henn, M., Weinstein, M., & Wring, D. (2002). A generation apart? Youth and political participation in Britain. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 4*, 167-192.

Jeffres, L. W., Lee, J.-W., Neuendorf, K., & Atkin, D. (2007). Newspaper reading supports community involvement. *Newspaper Research Journal, 28*(1), 6-23.

Kenski, K., & Stroud, N. J. (2006). Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 50*, 173-192.

Kim, J., Wyatt, R. O., & Katz, E. (1999). News, talk, opinion, participation: The part played by conversation in deliberative democracy. *Political communication, 16*, 361-385.

Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukopadhyay, T., & Scherlis, W. (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist, 53*, 1017-1031.

Krosnick, J. A. (1999). Survey research. *Annual Review of Psychology, 50*, 537-567.

Livingstone, S., Bober, M., & Helsper, E. J. (2005). Active participation or just more information? Young people's take-up of opportunities to act and interact on the Internet. *Information, Communication & Society, 8*, 287-314.

McLeod, J. M., & McDonald, D. G. (1985). Beyond simple exposure: Media orientations and their impact on political processes. *Communication Research, 12*(1), 3-33.

McLeod, J. M., Scheufele, D. A., & Moy, P. (1999). Community, communication, and participation: The role of mass media and interpersonal discussion in local political participation. *Political Communication, 16*, 315-336.

Milner, H. (2002). *Civic literacy: How informed citizens make democracy work*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Nie, N. H., & Erbring, L. (2002). Internet and mass media: A preliminary report. *IT & Society, 1*(2), 134-141.

Norris, P. (1996). Does television erode social capital? A reply to Putnam. *PS: Political Science and Politics, 29*, 474-480.

Norris, P., & Jones, D. (1998). Editorial: Virtual democracy. *International Journal of Press/Politics, 3*(2), 1-4.

O'Toole, T., Lister, M., Marsh, D., Jones, S., & McDonagh, A. (2003). Tuning out or left out? Participation and nonparticipation among young people. *Contemporary Politics, 9*(1), 45-61.

Pasek, J., Kenski, K., Romer, D., & Jamieson, K. H. (2006). America's youth and community engagement: How use of mass media is related to civic activity and political awareness in 14- to 22-year-olds. *Communication Research, 33*(3), 115-135.

Pew Internet & American Life Project. (2008). *Pew Internet & American Life Survey, May 2008*. Retrieved December 22, 2009, from http://www.pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data/Usage-Over-Time.aspx/

Phelps, E. (2004). Young citizens and changing electoral turnout, 1964-2001. *Political Quarterly, 75*, 238-248.

Phelps, E. (2005). Young voters at the 2005 Britain general election. *Political Quarterly, 76*, 482-487.

Pirie, M., & Worcester, R. (2000). *The big turn-off: Attitudes of young people to government, citizenship and community*. London: Adam Smith Institute.

Price, V., & Cappella, J. N. (2002). Online deliberation and its influence: The electronic dialogue project in campaign 2000. *IT & Society, 1*, 303-329.

Prior, M. (2005). News vs. entertainment: How increasing media choice widens gaps in political knowledge and turnout. *American Journal of Political Science, 49*, 577-592.

Putnam, R. D. (1995). Tuning in, tuning out: The strange disappearance of social capital in America. *PS: Political Science and Politics, 28*, 664-683.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Quintelier, E., & Vissers, S. (2008). The effect of Internet use on political participation: An analysis of survey results for 16-year-olds in Belgium. *Social Science Computer Review, 26*, 411-427.

Russell, A. (2004). The truth about youth? Media portrayals of young people and politics in Britain. *Journal of Public Affairs, 4*, 347-354.

Scheufele, D. A. (2002). Examining differential gains from mass media and their implications for participatory behavior. *Communication Research, 29*(1), 46-65.

Scheufele, D. A., & Nisbet, M. C. (2002). Being a citizen online: New opportunities and dead ends. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 7*(3), 55-75.

Shah, D. V., Cho, J., Eveland, W. P., Jr., & Kwak, N. (2005). Information and expression in a digital age: Modeling Internet effects on civic participation. *Communication Research, 32*, 531-565.

Shah, D. V., Kwak, N., & Holbert, R. L. (2001). "Connecting" and "disconnecting" with civic life: Patterns of Internet use and the production of social capital. *Political Communication, 18*, 141-162.

Shah, D. V., McLeod, J. M., & Yoon, S. (2001). Communication, context, and community: An exploration of print, broadcast and Internet influences. *Communication Research, 28*, 464-506.

Shah, D. V., Schmierbach, M., Hawkins, J., Espino, R., & Donavan, J. (2002). Nonrecursive models of Internet use and community engagement: Questioning whether time spent online erodes social capital. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 79*, 964-987.

Slater, M. D. (2004). Operational and analyzing exposure: The foundation of media effects research. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 81*, 168-183.

Slater, M. D. (2007). Reinforcing spirals: The mutual influence of media selectivity and media effects and their impact on individual behavior and social identity. *Communication Theory, 17*, 281-303.

Smith, A., & Rainie, L. (2008). *The Internet and the 2008 election*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Sunstein, C. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Tolbert, C. J., & McNeal, R. S. (2003). Unraveling the effects of the Internet on political participation? *Political Research Quarterly, 56*, 175-185.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weaver, D., & Drew, D. (2001). Voter learning and interest in the 2000 Presidential election: Did the media matter? *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 78*, 787-798.

Wyatt, R. O., Katz, E., & Kim, J. (2000). Bridging the spheres: Political and personal conversation in public and private spaces. *Journal of Communication, 50*(1), 71-92.

Xenos, M., & Moy, P. (2007). Direct and differential effects of the Internet on political and civic engagement. *Journal of Communication, 57*, 704-718.

Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2006). *A new engagement? Political participation, civic life, and the changing American citizen*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bios

Tom P. Bakker is a PhD candidate at The Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, University of Amsterdam.

Claes H. de Vreese is Professor of Political Communication and Scientific Director of The Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR, University of Amsterdam.