

The Effect of Internet Access on Political Communication

Findings from a Four-Year Panel Survey in Germany

Focus

Theoretical Background

Whenever new media emerged during the last century, questions have been raised about their impact on our societies. From a political communication point of view the question has mainly been about whether there is a negative, politically excluding effect of new media, or a positive, including one. While assumptions about a "media malaise" (Robinson 1976) or "eroding social capital" (Putnam 2000) are examples for a more negative perspective, there has also been research that provided evidence for a more positive expectation. Lazarsfeld's "activation effect" of radio campaigns (1944), the connection of dissemination of TV sets and growing political interest (Noelle-Neumann 1970) or the "virtuous circle" of Norris (2000) highlight this perspective.

With the Internet emerging in the mid nineties, the same questions were arising: Might there be a mobilizing effect of this new means of communication particularly in the field of political communication and participation? Is there a shift towards more engagement of individuals and, eventually, new forms of direct democracy?

Research Questions

Our research in this field focussed on the following questions:

- 1 Are there differences between Internet users and non-users regarding kind and intensity of political communication?
- 2 Is there a causal relationship between online access and changes in political communication of individuals?

Findings

Descriptive Findings

- 1 Internet users are generally more active in political communication than non-users.
- 2 Some means of online communication are used frequently for political communication; particularly the web serves as an important source of political information.
- 3 Political communication online happens mainly complementary to conventional forms of communication. The net does not just substitute offline communication.

activities	percentage of active citizens	
	non-users (n=648)	Internet users (n=1008)
offline		
Watching political TV-magazines	58	62
Reading newspapers	83	85
Talking about politics	89	96
Participating in demonstrations	10	12
Signing petitions	40	47
online		
Searching for political information	-	80
Visiting politicians' websites	-	32
Contacting politicians	-	10
Talking about politics	-	37
Signing petitions	-	12

Testing for "Mobilization"

In a first step, the development of political communication (measured by indices of the intensity of all respective activities) between 2002 and 2003 is observed separately for treatment and control group (col. 1 and 2).

In a second step, a comparison of the development of the two groups shows whether there is a significant difference between the two groups and therefore an effect of the variable "Internet access" on the intensity of political communication (col. 3).

activities	change accessors (2002-2003) (n=54)	change non-users (2002-2003) (n=162)	difference accessors vs. non-users
Information communication (index)	0,91 *	0,29	1,00 ***
Interpersonal communication (index)	- 0,09	0,24 **	- 0,17
Participation communication (index)	- 0,62	2,29 **	- 1,38

The results show that there is a **significant increase in political information communication**, while the other forms of political communication (interpersonal and participation) seem not to be affected by Internet access. Additionally, analysis of variance supports this result: there are no other factors (e.g. raised income, changed perception of economic situation) accounting significantly for this increase in political communication.

Study profile

Design

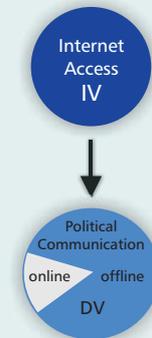
Data for this study were collected by telephone interviews using an RLD-sample of the German population aged 16 and above in a panel design. A total of four waves were conducted between January 2002 and February 2005. The number of cases available for cross sectional analysis (see "descriptive findings") was about 1500 in every wave, the number of cases available for a two wave analysis in a panel design was at least 900.

Variables

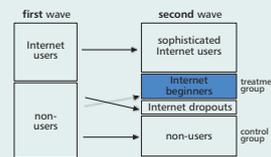
The **independent variable (IV)** "Internet access" was defined as the perceived possibility to go online plus a minimum of one hour spent online per week.

The **dependent variable (DV)** "political communication" was defined rather extensive as it comprised the following three forms of communication:

- 1 **Political information communication** - such as reading a newspaper or information material
- 2 **Political interpersonal communication** - private discussions about politics and personal contact with politicians
- 3 **Political participation communication** - forms of political action in the public sphere, such as demonstrations or membership in a citizens' action group



Quasi-Experiment



To prove the supposed causal relationship between Internet access and political communication a quasi-experimental design was set up. It contained one group receiving a "treatment" (getting online access between two measurements) and one control group (with no Internet access at any point of time).

The observation of differences of the development of political communication of these two groups in comparison will indicate whether there are causal effects of the Internet or not.

Conclusion

- 1 This study gives us the opportunity to observe effects of a new medium parallel to the process of its diffusion and prove supposed effects in a quasi-experimental design.
- 2 There is evidence for a limited mobilizing effect of Internet access: political information communication increased significantly after people went online, while other forms of political communication were not affected by this expansion of the individual communication repertoire.
- 3 Our results raise new questions: one of them is the question whether these effects are lasting or just a short term phenomenon. Not less important is the question for an explanation of this moderate effect of the Internet. Analysis of newer survey data from our project indicates that rational choice theory, assuming that people decide about their actions after individual calculations of costs and benefits, may help us to understand this effect.

For more information visit: <http://www.tu-ilmenau.de/fakmn/befragung.html>

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