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# Online Participation and Mobilisation in Britain: Hype, Hope and Reality

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PREDICTIONS about the role of the Internet in political participation have ranged from a reinvigoration of the political process through increasing citizen engagement to the creation of a ‘couch potato democracy’ in which participation is mechanistic and unthinking. Much of the initial work was highly speculative and tended to be mostly wildly optimistic about the Internet’s mobilising potential.<sup>1</sup> More recently, empirical studies, particularly from the US, have given a more moderate, albeit predominantly sceptical, interpretation of Internet effects. This so-called normalisation thesis<sup>2</sup> suggests that the Internet and its associated technologies, such as email, will not initiate any dramatic changes in the current socio-political order but rather will actually be absorbed and reproduce the existing biases. Thus, instead of producing any dramatic enhancement or erosion of representative democracy, the new medium produces few if any, tangible attitudinal or behavioural changes, and those that are discernible are largely predictable, based on existing patterns of participation.

This article examines these debates in the UK context, where considerably less empirical work has been conducted. It draws together research on how a range of political organisations (parties, trade unions, new social movements and protest networks) use the Internet and how their members, and the wider UK public, respond to online participatory opportunities.<sup>3</sup> In particular, it asks how far the new media can widen and deepen participation and whether certain types of political organisation may benefit more than others. The article is in four parts: first it reviews some of the competing claims about the Internet’s participatory potential; second it assesses how far organisations are exploiting the participatory potential of Internet; third it looks at how political activists and organisational members have responded to Internet; finally it examines the characteristics of the wider public online, the political activities they are undertaking online and their effect.

## *Participation online: possibilities and pitfalls*

Debates about the participatory potential of the Internet have led to contested claims about who is likely to engage in online participation, what types of participation are likely to predominate, the quality of

online participation and the overall impact of the Internet era on representative political organisations and institutions. These claims are highlighted below.

**LOWERING PARTICIPATORY COSTS?** One common line of argument from a political economy or rational choice perspective is that use of Internet technology could lower the costs of participation. This is based on the supposed ease of Internet communication. One can participate quickly via push button technology from the comfort of one's own home at a time of one's choosing. For example, virtual meetings or discussions can take place online through bulletin boards or chat rooms and act as a replacement for the traditional type of public meeting in the draughty town hall or public building. As a consequence, there is potential to expand the number of participants and bring in traditionally excluded groups such as housebound people, those with childcare responsibilities and elderly people, all of whom may have difficulties attending traditional political gatherings or voting. A recent UK parliamentary e-consultation exercise on domestic violence demonstrated some of this potential. With the help of women's refuges, online fora allowed those who had suffered domestic violence to make their opinions and experiences directly known to parliament. Most of these participants had no previous contact with the political process. The relative anonymity of computer mediated communication and the fact that participants did not have to travel to London to give evidence allowed new voices to be heard.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, others have noted that, far from lowering the costs of participation, use of new ICTs could actually raise them. There are still significant parts of the UK population who lack access to the technology. In the main, these are from lower socio-economic groups who already tend to be excluded from, or participate less in, the political process. The costs of computer equipment, whilst falling, are still substantial and even if access is provided publicly via community centres, schools or libraries, computing skills are still required to use the technology. Public information points do not provide access equal to home usage. Hence, as far as sceptics are concerned, this so-called digital divide limits any potential of the Internet for expanded participation. Indeed, there is a real danger of exacerbating existing participatory divides.

**INCREASING THE EFFICIENCY OF MOBILISATION?** From an organisational perspective, the Internet and email offer additional opportunities for more efficient recruitment and mobilisation. Websites can be used as marketing devices to attract new members. The gathering of email addresses and the use e-newsletters can also help organisations target members by sending information, requests for donations, membership application forms and renewal requests to supporters and sympathisers. Similarly, organisations can create subsites or specific pages devoted to particular

groups in society, e.g. young people, women or retired people. Many political organisations have acknowledged the appeal of the Internet to younger people and the possibility of recruiting a new generation of members and activists via the web. Given that visitors to organisational websites are likely to have some pre-existing interest in the organisation, there is clearly the potential to convert sympathisers into actual members. Moreover, the technology also allows organisations to target groups and even individuals. Through information gathered on website visitors, organisations can tailor websites to visitors' individual preferences. One rudimentary example of this was developed by the Conservatives during the 2001 election campaign. After completing a short series of questions on the website the 'My Manifesto' feature would highlight the policy commitments or issues of concern relevant to that individual visitor.<sup>5</sup>

Again, however, some of these supposed benefits are seen as debatable. Since the web is a pull technology, it is more difficult to communicate with those who lack pre-existing political motivation. The technology alone is unlikely to stimulate citizen interest in an organisation if none existed previously. Therefore, websites could be seen as preaching to the already politically converted, i.e. those with a political interest and in particular political activists.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, political organisations are also cautious about sending unwanted, unsolicited, mass emails to the public that may have a detrimental impact or are unlikely to be read anyway.

#### STIMULATING PARTICIPATION THROUGH ADDITIONAL INFORMATION?

One reason why the Internet might provide a stimulus for more political participation and activity is its ability to transmit and store vast quantities of information. Through thousands of news, politics and governmental websites, far more information is in the public domain and accessible than ever before. Why should this make a difference to participation? One argument is that exposure to increased political news and information creates further political socialisation and stimulates additional political activity. The Internet, therefore, can enhance the information available to the public and in consequence make a better informed and more engaged population. Buxton notes that through information sharing facilitated by its website, the Jubilee 2000 campaign (for cancellation of third world debt) produced extremely well-informed supporters who had the confidence to lobby and challenge policy makers.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst more information is undeniably available, a number of factors erode such potential. Firstly, one has to be knowledgeable and political motivated to find the information online in the first place: people have to have a reason to surf and know where to look. However, it is not simply a question of finding information. Given the vast number of websites, how do people know which sites to trust and with the volume of information available will citizens simply become overloaded? One way of avoiding overload is to filter out information but this then

creates a further problem. People have increased media choice with digital and satellite television and the Internet so can filter out all the information they do not want to read or do not like. They may passively absorb news and political comment from radio and terrestrial television but on the Internet can simply avoid politics altogether or reinforce existing prejudices or opinion by only visiting websites created by like minded people with similar interests. Effectively, therefore, citizens are increasingly able to cut themselves off from counter arguments and debate.<sup>8</sup>

CREATING VIRTUAL POLITICAL NETWORKS? One of the apparent benefits of new communications technology is the ability to communicate with large numbers of people across time and geographic boundaries. It also makes it easier to identify other individuals with common political interests and create links and networks online. At the local level, one might be able to foster social capital online, producing greater degrees of community interest, trust and activity. At the national and international level, it is now possible to form much more stable networks. Many commentators have pointed to the role of the Internet/email in assisting the globalisation of protest movements. This is notable in the recent anti-capitalist demonstrations in Seattle (1999), London (2000) and Genoa (2001) and the Stop the War campaign protesting against conflict in Iraq (2003). Email, in particular, has helped coordinate and mobilise protest quickly and simultaneously around the world.<sup>9</sup> Despite these possibilities, sceptics question whether strong ties can really develop online, seeing surfing the Internet as a solitary and individual activity that is unlikely to foster collective action or increase the levels of personal trust required for direct action politics. Several studies argue that the Internet is unlikely to create political social ties where non previously existed, i.e. most political activists who use the Internet already have well developed networks which they then extend into cyberspace.<sup>10</sup>

PROVIDING NEW FORMS OF PARTICIPATION? The arrival of the net has opened new modes of participation. The last decade seen the emergence of electronic voting, e-polling, e-consultation and e-petitions, all of which now feature in the arsenals of political organisations and activists. The Internet has also spawned new forms of direct action, notably political hacking (hacktivism), where radical protesters have targeted and disrupted the computer and information systems of multinationals, government and economic agencies and organisations by defacing websites, creating spoof sites, and rerouting web traffic. Whilst these are technically new forms of activity, one could argue they are simply traditional protest activities that are extended into a new (virtual) world. Moreover, some radical activists have suggested that such virtual activity is no replacement for the real world politics. In other words, sitting in front of a computer screen is not the same as taking part in a live demonstration

or protest. Nor is it likely to inspire people to further action in the same way as face-to-face protest.

INCREASING THE QUALITY AND EQUALITY OF PARTICIPATION? The style of web based discussion could also bring benefits. The relative anonymity of participants means that in e-discussion or consultation people are judged on the quality of their participatory contribution rather than on what they look like, how old they are and what accent they have. Those people who might be discouraged from participating and speaking at public meetings might feel more at ease and inclined to participate in a web discussion. Furthermore, the textual format of web debates also means that there is a transparent record of participation. However, the experience of much open unmoderated political discussion online has been disappointing. With online anonymity, participants are free from normal social restraints on behaviour at face-to-face political meetings or debates. One can easily give one's opinions but no one is forced to listen to others. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether anyone is really listening or who people really are online.

INCREASING ORGANISATIONAL PLURALISM? In broader democratic terms, an area that has been much discussed is what type of political organisations are best placed to use the new technologies and gain the most from any increased mobilisation. One school of thought suggests that the Internet is likely to increase pluralism and organisational diversity within liberal democracies. Some American commentators have suggested that the big losers in the Internet era are likely to be traditional representative organisations such as trade unions and political parties, whilst single issue and flash campaigns are likely to be the main winners for a number of reasons.<sup>11</sup> Firstly, the style of Internet communication is more direct, therefore people are more likely to engage individually or through more direct action, single-issue organisations. Secondly, the non-hierarchical structures and flexibility of flash campaigns and protest networks mean that they are more likely to experiment with the technology. Thirdly, the relatively low cost of producing a website and communicating one's message means that even small fringe organisations can compete more effectively with the major political players. Finally, unlike the traditional media, the lack of editorial control on the web means that small fringe organisations can reach a much greater audience than through the traditional press or television and radio, where they are largely ignored. Yet despite these apparent benefits some commentators have cast doubt on any levelling effect of the Internet. Margolis and Resnick (2000) have suggested that a process of normalisation and commercialisation of the web is taking place, leading to the predominance of the traditional resource rich political players—they can afford to invest in sophisticated websites, advertise their sites more effectively and attract far bigger online audiences.

In short, a major divide exists. Internet optimists argue that the technology can widen political participation, bring new people into the political process, increase the range of protest and participatory opportunities, and foster the creation of new political networks and virtual communities, thus deepening the quality of participation and facilitating a more vibrant pluralist democracy. On the other hand, sceptics suggest that the Internet is unlikely to alter participation very much and, if it does, it is likely to be for the worse, exacerbating social divides, eroding collective political action and creating a shallow populist style of democracy.

### *Political organisations online: development, strategy and content*

In order to examine the issues outlined above the authors have tracked the online activities of 30 UK based organisations (trade unions, parties, NGOs and protest networks) over a two year period (2001–03). The results reported below are based on an analysis of their website content, in December 2001 and December 2002 along with interviews with key personnel.

Websites are no longer novel. Nearly all serious political organisations now feel it necessary to have an online presence. For the most part, the formal political organisations we looked at have had public websites since the mid to late 1990s. In most cases, parties, cause groups and trade unions set up sites with little strategic thought as to the benefits that the Internet could bring. Indeed, many were initially set up as experiments by IT staff or informal groups of members before being formalised into the organisation. They were often created as the result of peer pressure as their competitor organisations already had them. As websites developed and became part of the official communication machinery, organisations began to develop post-hoc strategies. One noticeable trend over past few years is that the control of websites within organisations has often moved from IT departments to campaigns or press and publicity departments. This indicates the shifting functions of a website—it has moved from a technical adjunct to a political campaigning device. As web audiences have grown and the value of websites has increased, many organisations have attempted to integrate websites into their general communication strategy. However, many organisations fully admit they still lack a sophisticated strategy for ICT usage and, six or seven years on, they are only just beginning to explore the potential of a website. Certainly, there is a general sense that the sophistication of many governmental and political sites lags well behind that of the corporate sector.

Broadly, three interrelated potential functional benefits have emerged for political organisations:

- *Administration and information*: websites are used as archives or libraries, informational resources that can provide large amounts

## 1. Information Provided by Organisational Sites (%)

	December 2001	December 2002
Media releases/news (speeches, statements etc.)	96	94
Structure of the organisation	92	90
Article archive or library	92	93
Policies	88	89
People/who's who	63	67
Organisational newsletters/magazines/papers	63	67
Values/ideology	54	60
Event calendar	50	56
Organisational history	42	38
Conference information	42	44
Frequently asked questions	42	40
Organisation specialist group pages	29	32
Documents (i.e. rulebook, constitution)	29	29
Leader/key figures focus	17	21
<i>n</i>	<i>n</i> = 29	<i>n</i> = 30

Results refer to the percentage of sites reporting each item of information.

of information to the public or interested parties without the need to resort to mail or fax. This uses resources more efficiently.

- *Campaigning and news production*: organisations can use websites to campaign about particular issues or themes, by delivering their message unmediated into the public domain. In short, the web offers the chance for pressure groups parties and protest campaigns to set their own agenda.
- *Interactive participation*: websites can be used to encourage recruitment and donations online; campaign via e-petitions, or advertise offline rallies. More uniquely, via bulletin boards, e-mail lists and chat rooms, organisations can create participatory spaces for members and supporters to engage in ongoing dialogue both with the organisation and with each other.

Our content analysis of websites, along with other surveys, shows clear patterns. Most sites convey information about the organisation (see Table 1). The standard political organisational website tends to have history pages, a values section, news or press release pages, an organisational map, along with policy papers and publications. Political websites have often been seen as content light, propaganda or advertising brochures but, in fact, many of the sites we looked at were actually content heavy, with policy and official documents, research and news archives. In part, this reflects the rather elite audience that organisations have discovered use their sites, in particular, journalists, researchers, academics, students and their own members.

Although sites often contain large quantities of information, campaigning, mobilising and participatory features are considerably less

## 2. Participatory and Interactive Opportunities Offered by Organisational Sites (%)

	December 2001	December 2002
Joining information	79	83
Email contact point	63	65
Search engine	54	55
Campaigning/volunteering information	50	52
Downloadable campaign material	46	44
Sign up for e-news	46	48
Petitioning/surveys online	42	52
Membership section	38	41
Donating online	37	34
Joining online	29	38
Political dialogue (bulletin boards, chat rooms etc.)	29	31
Trying to influence others' opinions (e-postcards, e-messages)	17	16
E-campaigning (online activism)	8	10
<i>n</i>	<i>n</i> = 29	<i>n</i> = 30

Results reported refer to the percentage of sites offering each participation opportunity.

prominent (see Table 2). Many of the sites examined, around 80%, contain webpages dedicated to encouraging recruitment and membership. However, this is less impressive than it first appears since often one can not actually join fully online. Although online joining is growing it was still only possible on 38% of the sites examined here. In many cases, one still has to download application forms to fill in manually and send through the post rather than complete online. This is particularly evident among UK trade unions, none of which made it possible to join via an online transaction. Concerns about online payments and also fear of undermining branch recruitment activities appeared to be holding back online recruitment. Overall, organisations report that the Internet is a small but growing element of their recruitment machinery and is likely to replace some of the more traditional modes of joining such letters and fax.

Most political organisations rhetorically acknowledge the potential of the Internet to target groups and narrowcast, in particular, to attract younger audiences, but actual use of active narrowcasting or targeting tools is relatively limited and often amounts to no more than a web page within a site. However, the TUC, in conjunction with the National Union of Students, has invested significant resources in launching an online service package for graduates to attempt to attract younger people into the trade union movement.

Much of the hype surrounding the participatory possibilities of the Internet has centred on its interactive elements. However, interactive communication on political organisations' websites is not particularly common. On less than a third of the sites could one engage in interactive

political dialogue. Although website email contact points are considerably more frequent, these tend to be general organisational, rather specific personal, email addresses. Consequently, direct e-access to elected officials (party politicians and executive committee members, for example) is more difficult. Even where email is available, there is no guarantee of receiving a reply from the organisation. There is considerable fear amongst many organisations of being inundated with email (much of which may be trivial or abusive) that they are unable to answer, which would damage their reputation. Email often gives the appearance of organisational transparency but in reality is much more limited.

Although a minority of unions, NGOs and parties run relatively successful member-only subscription based e-discussion systems, in the main, open discussion fora are not used extensively by organisations and many discussion areas are not well used by the public or members. In the vast majority of cases, internal e-discussion areas tend to be used for information exchange, questions and answer sessions, or more occasionally for informal consultation. Few of these systems play any formal or decisive role in policy making. The Labour Party has run several online Q&A sessions with leading party figures. However, it is difficult to tell how open such fora are and the agenda is still largely determined by the party rather than the public or members. Age Concern has also held similar sessions on its site with government ministers concerning issues such as pensions policies. In some ways, the reluctance to embrace open public e-discussion is not surprising. From an organisational perspective, investments in this sort of activity is time consuming and potentially risky. Smaller organisations tend to lack the staff resources to manage ongoing online discussion fora. The demand for such spaces seems somewhat limited and the number of participants is generally small. Even in large trade unions (with hundreds of thousands of members), participants number only in the hundreds and regular users are often only a handful. Organisations expressed concern that they would be in danger of creating 'virtual ghost towns' or 'empty desolate wastelands',<sup>12</sup> which would reflect badly on the vitality of website and the organisation generally. Moreover, open fora are often of poor quality. Open discussion fora run the risk of abuse from opponents. The Ulster Unionist Party removed its guestbook as a result of constant flaming (multiple abusive messages). This is not to argue that interactive dialogue cannot be beneficial both to organisations and their wider membership. One Green Party spokesperson indicated that email was now becoming a central day-to-day dialogue and made ongoing discussion, at least amongst elected officials, considerably easier and made a significant contribution to the running of a resource-poor organisation.

We could find few examples of active and novel online mobilisation campaigns which integrated different forms of technology (audio, video, and mobile phone technology for example), allowing members or supporters to take part in e-protest. However, several NGOs including

CAFOD, Age Concern, Greenpeace and Oxfam have started to develop the notion of the e-activist, where web surfers can sign up not only to receive additional regular information but also to 'take part in campaigns from the comfort of ones own armchair', as Oxfam puts it ([www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)).

A couple of campaigns show what can be done online with only limited resources. PayupTony.com ([www.payuptony.com](http://www.payuptony.com)) is a site set up by two undergraduate students concerned about student debt. With very little financial support and no initial backing from any political organisation, they created an e-petition for the abolition of students loans and tuition fees which quickly gained momentum and press coverage. 10,000 signed the e-petition within the first couple of months, which was then delivered to Downing Street. At the time of writing, around 14 months later, a further 80,000 have signed the petition. Fax Your MP ([www.faxyourmp.com](http://www.faxyourmp.com)) is another example of a virtual campaign which could not survive without the Internet. With no physical offices and minimal resources, a handful of volunteers maintain a site that enables the public to contact their MP by fax. The site provides fax numbers of MPs, advice on contacting MPs and processes the fax messages. In less than three years the site has carried over 50,000 faxes to MPs and wider context highlighted the wider issue of difficulty of citizens being able to contact easily their representatives, particularly by email.

Overall, the online participatory opportunities provided by political organisations are relatively limited. Mainstream political organisations have developed a cautious approach and, in the main, have tried to adapt new technology to do the things they traditionally done, only more effectively. Organisations tend to want to keep control of the participatory agenda. Hence, much of their communication with supporters and the wider public is one-way and top-down, rather than two-way and interactive. The most novel uses of the technology not surprisingly tend to come from protest networks who have a long tradition of developing new protest tactics and have a more direct participatory culture. It is also not surprising that mainstream political organisations have been relatively conservative, for they have more to lose and less to gain. Parties, large pressure groups and trade unions come under more scrutiny both internally and externally. Internally, those responsible for web campaigns have to justify their actions to both leadership and wider membership. Externally, such organisations are subject to wider scrutiny from the traditional media. Hence, online experiments that fail are likely to have far more detrimental consequences for such organisations than they would for ad hoc protest campaigns or direct action networks.

### *Activists and members online*

In examining how members were using the new technology to participate in organisational life and, more importantly, whether it was

enhancing their participatory experience, we undertook members surveys with a number of organisations. Two of these are reported here—the Countryside Alliance (CA) and the Liberal Democrats. The former included both an online survey (with 1065 respondents) and a postal survey of a sample of around 2000 members, with a response rate of 21%. The latter was an online survey of the Liberal Democrat email list, with over 2000 responses. Clearly the findings we report below are, therefore, indicative rather than representative. However, fairly consistent patterns emerge in all the membership surveys we have undertaken.<sup>13</sup>

**THE COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE:** Given the stereotypical picture of CA members—rural, ageing, middle-class, conservative, obsessed with countryside sports—the group might be seen as offering fairly barren ground for online participation. Yet, the CA have devoted considerable resources to building up their new media strategy, a communications centre has been created, databases of email addresses are maintained and an e-news bulletin is distributed regularly to over 30,000 members and supporters. In advance of the CA's 'Liberty and Livelihood' March on London in 2002 both the website and email updates were used extensively to publicise the event to members. Some of this investment is beginning to pay off with members. According to the postal questionnaire almost 60% of members reported accessing the Internet and, of those, just over half say they have visited the CA website.<sup>14</sup> Compared to the average CA member, those visiting the site tend to be younger, more recent recruits with higher incomes. Similar patterns were also reflected in the online survey of website users. It seems that the Internet is expanding the reach of the CA to a constituency which it has not been able to attract through more conventional methods. Moreover, follow-up questions to those using the Web and email services revealed that these tools also have an impact on their decisions to become more involved. Both visiting the website and receiving emails tend to produce a mobilising effect by getting members out campaigning and involved in direct action. For instance, almost one-third (31% of members using the Internet) reported that website was an important stimulus in their decision to take part in the march on London. Email also appeared to stimulate members to undertake more activities such as contacting media organisations and elected representatives, as well as keeping them involved in the more routine activities of the CA through reminders to attend meetings and prompts to volunteer help.

**THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS:** Unlike the CA, the Liberal Democrats were, from the beginning seen as a good 'test case' to examine political parties' propensity to using the technology in participatory and innovative ways. The Liberal Democrats have a decentralist ethos that promotes the grass roots involvement, a predominantly middle class membership

who would be more likely to be using the Internet, and a former leader (Paddy Ashdown) who championed the Internet as a vital tool for the party to promote itself and, more broadly, as a way for people to have more input into the political process. Since 1994 the party has run a subscription based intranet for members to discuss party affairs and acquire campaign software, the membership of which by late 2002 stood at approximately eight hundred. In addition, the party keeps an email database of members, which currently stands at around nine thousand.

As with the CA, the youthfulness of the respondents was notable as was their higher socio-economic status. The web's utility in attracting new members is exhibited by the fact that almost one third of all respondents agreed that the website had been an important factor in prompting them to join the party. For these more recent recruits, it is also interesting to note that they tend to be less politically engaged than the longer term supporters, meaning that the web may be opening up a channel for the party to connect to individuals who might otherwise have slipped through the net. Four fifths of the online members say they have used the website and a quarter visit it every week. When comparing the relative utility of the web and email for mobilising people and stimulating further participatory activities, the web does not rate very highly. Its principal use seems to be as a general information tool, and also as an adjunct for joining. Email, on the other hand, does emerge as a somewhat stronger stimulus, particularly in the more routine areas of contacting and volunteering. Further analysis of those engaging in email related activism, however, shows them to be highly engaged in offline party activities. Thus, the greatest benefit of email would seem to lie with the activists, providing them with an additional tool to carry out their work for the party.

Essentially, four key points emerge from the surveys of online members and activists. Firstly, there is evidence to suggest that political organisations' constituency is being potentially widened by their using new ICTs. The youth appeal of the new medium is clear and for older organisations and those with a more 'staid' image, such as CA or political parties, this represents an important avenue to exploit. In addition, web and email do seem to be working to stimulate participation, but in rather different ways. The web's main mobilising role, based on these findings, stems from its 'public' dimension. It serves to inform and thereby help to coordinate one-off, large mass rallies and demonstrations. Also, by offering a more immediate and direct means for signing oneself up, it appears to serve as a 'joining' tool. Email, however, while it certainly is linked with getting members to be more active and attend events, seems to occupy a niche in terms of sustaining members' contact with the organisation. The mass-based, but individualised mode of communication it entails makes it particularly suited to such purposes. Finally, the evidence from these organisations also suggests that an intensification of activism is taking place. Thus, as well as widening the

reach to new recruits, the medium is extracting more from the already committed.

### *The wider e-public*

In addition to examining specific initiatives taken by a wide range of political organisations in the UK in the area of online participation, we also looked at the extent to which these efforts and use of the Internet more generally, were leading to any mobilisation in the broader public. In order to do this we commissioned a national survey of attitudes and behaviour (run by NOP) in May 2002 that examined the online political habits of the British public with a particular focus on their orientation toward participation in the organisational context. Looked at in one way the data clearly confirmed the ideas that online politics is of limited interest for the vast majority of the population and those engaging in it were largely drawn from the socio-economic elite. However, we also found evidence of a potential underlying these results that strongly suggested future possibilities for the Internet to widen the pool of participants and bring in some 'unheard voices'.

The survey revealed that as of May 2002 almost half (49%) of the British population were online, a figure that matched that reported by Government data on Internet adoption in Britain during the same time period.<sup>15</sup> Since then, reports reveal that levels have risen quite significantly. By February 2003, approximately 28.7 million adults or 62% of adults in Great Britain reported having accessed the Internet at some time in their lives.<sup>16</sup>

We then sought to specify the forms of political action that were available to users online, and of particular interest were the new options offered in terms of political activities. While we were conscious that many online activities have an offline component, we did not want to restrict ourselves to these latter forms of participation since, as stated earlier, we reasoned that it was more meaningful to ask about more Internet-specific activities. Thus, we tailored the options to relate to more specific, and also some new uses of the technology such as visiting a website, signing an online petition, sending an e-postcard, or participating in a chat room or email discussion board.

Combining the results, it would appear that the politically active population among British Net users is quite small. 17%, or just less than one in five Internet users report having participated in any one of the range of behaviours put forward. It should be remembered, however, that we were asking about types of engagement other than voting which would necessarily lower the level of activity reported. For example, in our study we also asked about offline forms of participation and while 62% of people reported voting, only 18% reported that they had ever contacted a politician. In addition, we also found that most people tended to be non-cumulative in their online participatory behaviour, engaging in only one or two of the specified activities. Such findings

suggested that online politics was not confined to a small mob of political fanatics but attracted a wider range of people, who dabbled in a variety of areas.

Overall, the most common forms of activity, mirroring trends in traditional or offline participation, were the less active types, with most people reporting either looking for political information online or having visited an organisation's website. However, interestingly there was not a sharp divide between these and the more active types of engagement such as signing an online petition or sending an email to a politician.

Not only were overall levels of activity low, online participation was dominated by the educated upper middle-classes. Our data showed that while professional classes made up 18% of the sample overall, they comprised almost one third of online participators. Manual and semi-skilled workers (DE), however, while they comprised 32% of the sample, formed only 16% of the online participators. The more highly educated were similarly over-represented with the 17% most highly educated segment of the sample, constituting almost two fifths of the online participators (37%). Men also tended to predominate in online politics, forming only half of the overall sample but two thirds of the pool of participators.

Certainly, the evidence to this point strongly suggested that it was participation as usual online (see Table 3). Three important caveats emerged, however, to qualify this picture. First, the findings about young people clearly did not follow a 'reinforcing' pattern to that seen in offline participation. Those aged between 15 and 24 years, despite being one of the smallest age groups represented in the sample, formed the biggest group of Internet-based participators, firmly displacing the middle-aged (45–54 years) who typically dominate in the offline world. A full 30% of the youngest age group reported that they had engaged in some form of online participation compared with only 11% of this older group. Second, in addition to this clear propensity among young people toward online politics, our findings revealed a very small, but distinct group of people who engaged only in online participation. While small in number, the striking characteristic to emerge was that socio-economic status appeared to be of far less importance in identifying these people. Indeed, as well as being younger, it was those lower on the occupational scale (DE) who predominated (43%). Such results are highly significant since they suggest that different, less material kinds of resources may be important in predicting online participation and that once issues of access are overcome, we may see a new type of activist emerging. Finally, although the numbers visiting websites for information were very small, follow-up questions that asked about the specific sites that had been visited (political party, pressure group, charity, mainstream or alternative news media site) revealed that in all cases a significant proportion of those visiting would *not* have sought information

## 3. Demographics of those Engaged in Online Politics (%)

Demographic Characteristics	Overall Sample Demographics	Engaged in Online Political Activity
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	49	66
Female	51	34
<i>Age</i>		
15–24	15	30
25–34	18	28
35–44	19	23
45–54	16	11
55–64	13	7
65+	19	1
<i>Standard Class</i>		
AB	18	30
C1	29	43
C2	21	11
DE	32	16
<i>Years in Education</i>		
Lowest	11	1
	49	21
	16	21
Highest	17	37
Students	7	21
Totals	<i>n</i> = 1972	<i>n</i> = 162

Source: NOP survey of UK population (15 years +) 9–14 May 2002.

on the group or issue if they had had to rely on conventional methods such as telephone or mail. This was particularly the case for general news gathering, but even for political parties a full third of those accessing the site said they would not have bothered, had it not been for the net.<sup>17</sup> The effects of these visits were overwhelmingly beneficial for the organisations since most people reported being more interested in them after they had looked at their sites, this being especially true for the less visible types of organisations such as anti-capitalist protest networks and ‘indy media’ organisations.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the findings about individual-initiated forms of participation, we were also interested in exploring the new possibilities the Internet offers for external mobilisation through direct email from organisations to individuals. To tap this dimension we asked a range of questions about whether Internet users had ever received political messages online about an organisation or campaign. The format of these messages was differentiated as: email postcards, newspaper articles, petitions, e-newsletters, election material, and requests for funds or a donation to a needy cause. While the vast majority (84%) of net users had not received any one of these stimuli, those that had reacted essentially very positively. Although just under a third ignored the message, two thirds had some form of more active response. At minimum this was to do nothing more than occasionally read them, however, one

fifth of those in receipt of these stimuli actually said they would either sometimes or always respond.

Here again, while few people reported receiving these e-stimuli, there is clearly an untapped market of interest in this type of political contacting by organisations. Putting these findings together with the evidence reported above of how website visits provoked follow-up interest, these tactics clearly could have a significant pay-off for organisations in terms of motivating people to get more involved with them. Such cold calling is cheap and easily implemented on the Internet and could clearly kick start spirals of participation that do not exist in the 'real world'. Also, because it seems that the online environment attracts some new people into participation that might otherwise not bother with the offline variety the proliferation of such stimuli could very effectively expand the pool of the political active.

### *Conclusion*

The initial hype surrounding the Internet's emergence has meant that its subsequent impact in the political sphere has looked rather limited. However, if we simply dismiss the Internet as politically irrelevant we are missing some of the more subtle changes it may facilitate in participatory politics. Furthermore, at this stage, it would be foolish to make definitive predictions when the technology may change significantly over the next ten to twenty years. Nevertheless, our early research indicates that the Internet will make a modest positive contribution to participation and mobilisation. Whilst the Internet does not universally lower the costs of participation, it may bring some new individuals and groups into the political process—notably younger people, many of whom have grown up with the Internet as part of their daily lives. The surveys of political activists and organisational members also indicate that the Internet can deepen their participatory experiences and extend their range of participatory activities. Although it does seem that the types of participatory activities favoured are the less novel political information gathering rather than interactive discussion or online networking.

In terms of the wider consequences for representative democracy in the UK, the Internet alone will not bring change. However, as Bimber (1998) has argued, it may help accelerate some longer term trends in politics. In particular, it seems most likely to assist the increasingly prominent development of protest networks, flash and single-issue campaigns. This is not to say that the traditional political intermediaries, such as parties, trade unions and large pressure groups, will become redundant—they will adapt and use the technology for their own ends. However, life may become more problematic for politicians and policy makers. The Internet is likely to increase the pressure on our representative system by facilitating more protest, more ad hoc campaigns, more expectations of rapid and direct communication between government and citizens. All of this makes it harder for governments to develop a

more coherent policy agenda. It seems that democracy in the information age is set to become more difficult and more unpredictable.

- 1 See, for example, N. Negroponte, *Being Digital*, Coronet, 1995, or L. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic*, Penguin, 1995.
- 2 See particularly, M. Margolis and D. Resnick, *Politics as Usual: the Cyberspace Revolution*, Sage, 2000; and P. Norris, *A Virtuous Circle*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- 3 For details of the wider research project see [www.ipop.org.uk](http://www.ipop.org.uk).
- 4 S. Coleman, *Hearing Voices: The Experience of Online Public Consultations and Discussions in UK Governance*, Hansard Society, 2002.
- 5 See J. Jackson, 'View from the Parties: The Conservatives' in S. Coleman (ed.), *2001 Cyberspace Odyssey: The Internet in the UK Election*, Hansard Society, 2001.
- 6 For more on this argument in relation to political parties, see P. Norris, 'Preaching to the Converted? Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites', *Party Politics*, January 2003.
- 7 N. Buxton, 'Dial Up Networking for Debt Cancellation and Development: A Case Study of Jubilee 2000' in S. Hick and J. McNult (eds), *Advocacy, Activism and the Internet*, Lyceum Books, 2002.
- 8 See C. Sunstein, *Republic.com*, Princeton University Press, 2001.
- 9 For details of the usefulness of the Internet in the Stop War Movement see A. Alexander, 'A Revolution for Revolt', *Guardian*, 20.2.03.
- 10 See M. Diani, 'Social Movements Networks, Virtual and Real', *Information Communication and Society*, Autumn 2000.
- 11 B. Bimber, 'The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community and Accelerated Pluralism', *Polity*, 1998.
- 12 Interviews with organisational officials 2 August 2002.
- 13 Membership were undertaken additionally with the GPMU trade union and the Labour Party. Details of the surveys can be found at [www.ipop.org.uk](http://www.ipop.org.uk) and the findings of the Liberal Democrat survey are reported more fully in W. Lusoli, R. Gibson and S. Ward, 'Virtually Participating: A Survey of Online Party Members', *Information Polity*, Summer 2003.
- 14 The postal questionnaire was sent to 1969 members in a random sample stratified according to region, the organisation being divided into 17 geographic units.
- 15 For instance the authoritative OFTEL Residential survey of Internet use, see the 29 April 2002 release <http://www.oftel.co.uk/publications/research/2002/q8intr0402.htm>. See also the July 2002 report from National Statistics, found at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdffdir/intacc0702.pdf>.
- 16 Figures taken from 'Internet Access: 11.4 Million Homes Now Online' Report published online 29 April 2003. Source for individuals accessing the Internet: National Statistics Omnibus Survey. Available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/mugget.asp?ID=8&Pos=4&ColRank=1&Rank=176> (accessed on 11 May 2003).
- 17 The questions asked were two-fold: first, whether respondents had ever visited one of a range of six types of political organisations or news sites or had some type of online communication with them. Overall 29% reported having done so. Those that had visited the sites were then whether they would have done this by other means, such as writing or telephoning, or researching them in a library if the online method had not been available? Overall 35% said they would not and 63% said that they would.
- 18 The question asked respondents what impact visiting the sites or having online contact with these organisations had had on them. Their options ranging from less likely, no difference, more likely to find out more, more likely to become actively involved and actually became actively involved. Overall while 61% reported no difference, this was skewed by the response to the mainstream news sites. For parties, pressure groups, alternative media groups and protest networks, the majority of respondents reported their visit stimulated them to find out, and in some instances become more actively involved.