YOUTH, ICTS AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

ABSTRACT

Youth are often portrayed as least resistant towards the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs). This article presents the findings of a survey on patterns of students' use of ICTs, and their perceptions of the role of ICTs in enhancing participation in civic activities, especially as it relates to their involvement in (and input on) higher education policies and university life.

The emergence of a vast body of research on 'digital democracy' (and variants such as e-government, teledemocracy, cyberdemocracy, etc.) points to an interest about the effects of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on civic participation (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000). While the potential of the Internet for transforming politics, the nature of government, and overall civic participation has yet to be demonstrated, many government functions have already begun to move to the web. Canadian government information, for instance, is increasingly being offered in electronic form as part of the large E-government initiative, which aims at making Canada the world leader in terms of connecting citizens to their government electronically via computer or wireless connections. Electronic voting (e-voting) has been adopted in the US and elsewhere, and experiments with Internet voting (i-voting) have been undertaken, with notable examples in the 2000 Arizona Democratic Primary and several i-voting pilots in local British elections in 2002. In Canada, Barrie (Ontario) became the first Canadian municipality to move to an electronic voting system, in 1997. Increasingly, new venues for civic and political participation are appearing, in which participation necessitates access to ICTs and the ability (or willingness) to use them (Muir & Oppenheim, 2002).

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Background

Since a majority of youth fall within the specific age group and category of users often portrayed as technological 'haves' (i.e. least resistant towards the adoption of ICTs) but also those at risk for low political participation levels, this population was targeted for this exploratory survey. The aim of the study was to assess the general computing literacy of this user group and its perceptions about the usefulness of digital technologies, such as Internet voting, as a means to improve civic participation (both at the campus level and in society at large). The key research questions investigated include: 1) how familiar were students with technology, and what were their use patterns; 2) whether personal communication technologies, such as the Internet, enhance or diminish social community and participation in university life; 3) the barriers to access (infrastructure, skills, etc.); 4) the links that exist between online and offline activities (e.g., which of these activities are deemed most fruitful by students, and for what purposes? and does one encourage more participation than the other?).

The study was conducted in February and March 2002 at a major Canadian university (Hall & Caidi, 2003). Because it was exploratory in nature, the sample was non-representative of the overall population of the university. It consisted of 100 students who volunteered to fill out a nine-page questionnaire containing both multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. The questionnaire examined 1) the students' experience with computers (skills and training; access to and familiarity with various hardwares and softwares; current use of computers and the Internet); and 2) their computer usage for civic life (i.e. their motivations for using computers and accessing the Internet, their current experience with political activities via technological means, their perceptions of Internet voting, their involvement in campus life, etc.).

Findings

The findings show that the sample population approximated the characteristics of the larger student body at this university in terms of gender, age and possibly ethnic background. Forty percent of the respondents reported having a native language other than English. Under 'ethnic background', the largest subgroup had roots in the Indian Subcontinent (India and Pakistan).

In terms of computer literacy, 100% of respondents in the sample surveyed used computers, with 98% using them daily. Overall, respondents had high rates of access to computers: 91% of respondents had access to a computer at home, using it for an average time of 3 hours per day (with one student reported using the home computer for 10 hours per day). Among those who owned a computer, a majority owned PC compatible desktops running MS Windows. Access at the university was also significant: an overwhelming 99% reported having access to computers at the university, using them for an average of 2 hours per day. Interestingly, 32% of students asked to comment on the statement: 'everyone at the university had the same opportunity to use technology' disagreed or somewhat disagreed with it. This perception of an inequity of access is interesting in that it does not seem to corroborate the findings.

The average time spent using computers was just under 6 hours per day. However, a group of 'super-users' emerged: 19 of the respondents reported using computers for a total of 10 or more hours per day, up to a maximum of 15 hours per day. As expected, the use of e-mail was very high, with 95% of respondents using it daily and the remaining 5% using it a couple of times per week. Taken altogether, these numbers appear to indicate a higher than average amount of time spent using computers by this sample as compared with the overall Canadian population; figures for 2000 show that the majority of Canadians who had Internet access spent an average of 1-7 hours per week on the net at home (61%), and that, of those who spent time on the Internet at work in the previous week, 61% spent an average time of 1-7 hours per week on the net at work (Dryburgh, 2002). Perhaps not surprisingly, given their unusually high use figures, 16% of students surveyed reported seeking medical attention due to physical pain or discomfort from using a computer. Physical problems cited included, shoulder, back, wrist and eyestrain, tearing, headaches, repetitive strain injuries, eye sensitivity, and blurred eyesight.

The three most common venues for acquiring computer skills and training were: high school (66%), university (58%) and friends (47%). There seems to be a rise in the number of classes taken by respondents in the age group '26-30 year-olds' as compared to the 'under 25' group, with the numbers dropping in the 'over 31' age group. The latter group was also more than twice as likely as the 'younger' groups to be self-taught. Moreover, we found that male respondents (42%) were more than twice as likely as female respondents (16%) to have taught themselves. Respondents of Asian heritage had the highest average number of classes taken, at just over 8 courses, followed by Caucasian respondents (just under 6 courses).

The section of the survey that dealt with patterns of use of ICTs by students showed that four of the most common purposes for using the Internet by our sample population included: information gathering and research (98%), library resources (90%), news (87%) and travel information (81%). When asked about their primary use of the Internet, 53% of students listed the establishment of friendships and social contacts, and 50% listed planning group activities. The computer was listed as the primary mode of communication with colleagues and friends by 40% of the sample. Moreover, 36% reported using chat groups and online bulletin boards. When asked about the ways in which they were getting information on campus life, 66% gave e-mail lists as their primary source, and 63% listed the Internet. The Internet was also used by 37% of the students to get involved in professional organizations. Another 53% reported that their primary use of the Internet was to establish professional contacts or interchanges. Finally, 89% supported the use of class e-mail lists for discussion and posting course-related papers.

We found that the pattern of use varied slightly based on gender: female respondents were more likely than their male counterparts to cite communication with friends or colleagues (including professional contact) as a primary use of the Internet. Males were more likely to cite entertainment as a primary use (including sharing or expressing opinions and non-work purposes).

Overall, the majority of students agreed with the statement that computers were indispensable to their personal, academic, and professional lives. We found that the pattern of use varied slightly based on gender: female respondents were more likely than their male counterparts to cite communication with friends or colleagues (including professional contact) as a primary use of the Internet. Males were more likely to cite entertainment as a primary use (including sharing or expressing opinions and non-work purposes). Other uses of the Internet among male respondents included: reading the news, games and entertainment, downloading applications, as well as shopping, chat, bulletin boards, learning about professional organizations, and website maintenance. Female respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to use it for class work, travel information, research and information gathering, and library searches. Asian respondents and those self-identified as 'other' were also almost twice as likely to use the Internet to get involved in professional organizations (as mentioned above, the largest subgroup in the 'other' category had roots in the Indian Subcontinent, notably India and Pakistan). Moreover, the Internet was used for checking the news by 100% of Middle Eastern and 'other' respondents. It seems likely that this stems from the presence on the Internet of international viewpoints and coverage.

The section of the survey that dealt with students' perceptions and/or habits of ICT use for civic involvement

(participation, deliberation and decision-making) elicited the following results: 84% believe computers can enhance the participation of students in campus life, however, 76% feel that using a computer to participate in campus life affects the way a person thinks and makes decisions differently than if a person met with others and went to gatherings. Students defined 'participation' in campus life in terms of: 'getting involved in one (or more) student groups' (76%); 'getting information on various issues of relevance to student life' (69%); 'voting for student representatives' (55%); 'serving on councils and committees' (51%); 'organizing or attending protests' (34%); 'knowing where all the good parties are' (31%).

These responses seem to indicate that information gathering and overall awareness about campus events was as important as more active participation, leadership and decision-making. The use of online means of participation in campus life and in civic activities elicited mixed answers. Some respondents referred to computers almost as extension of their bodies (as one respondent mentioned: "It [the computer] is part of me"); others made mention of the "increased psychological distance" associated with computer-mediated participation, which they viewed as an aid to free expression or as necessary to a more reasoned deliberation ("Using a computer gives a person more time to contribute more developed, well thought out ideas because of time factors and nervousness caused by human interaction"). On the other hand, others felt that "it's hard to duplicate human interaction" and that "nothing can ever replace social interaction; facial expression, vocal intonation and gestures influence people's opinions." One respondent explains: "Internet is good for getting information, but face-to-face is best for getting things done." Another shared her idea of participation: "A computer allows you to participate without really [being] actively participative. My idea of participation involves more than clicking a few buttons on a mouse."

When asked about their experience and feelings about Internet voting, students had equally mixed feelings: despite concerns about security, privacy, and equity of access, a majority of students supported Internet voting at the campus, city and federal levels (47% of students surveyed expressed having already used Internet voting). The 58 respondents who raised concerns about potential disadvantages of Internet voting mentioned security as a major problem. They noted fraud, threat of hackers, loss of privacy, tracking of the votes and coercion as potential risks. Most importantly, the data suggest that students' support for Internet voting is affected by the nature of the elections: the support for online voting seems to correlate inversely with the importance in scale of the election. While 88% of students expressed that they would vote for a student representative online, the numbers decrease when it comes to voting for a mayoral candidate (57%) or for an MP (55%) via online means.

Perhaps the discrepancy between perceived security risks and the willingness to use the technology all the same can be partially explained by the huge importance ascribed to *convenience.* Written response questions showed 'convenience' to be the most often cited advantage of online voting, followed by efficiency in savings of time and expense for administering the vote, the voting process itself ('less hassle', 'busy lifestyle'), and the ease in tallying the results. However, concerns around equity of access were acknowledged by many, with various references made to 'the poor,' the 'elderly' and 'those who are not comfortable' or 'familiar' with technology.

Conclusion

While there is not enough evidence to say whether the sample surveyed would be less resistant to online voting if serious guarantees were made by Internet voting companies about security and privacy issues, we can assume that this would be the case indeed, based on the overall patterns of use of ICTs by students both in their personal, academic and professional lives. Overall, our survey revealed a sample population that was both ethically aware and technologically savvy. As our research progressed, it became evident that many of the students had ceased to see interaction with ICTs as isolated from their 'real' lives, but rather, they had begun to incorporate information technology into almost every aspect of their lives. Since a considerable amount of the respondents' time each day is spent using computers, it would appear natural that those interested in political participation would use the affordances of ICTs to that end, and to a large extent, the students appear to be doing just that.

Notes

[1] The author wishes to acknowledge Stephanie Hall for her assistance in this research project.

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