

## **A Study of the Relationship between Cyberspace and Political Participation (The Case of Students at the University of Isfahan)**

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### **Introduction**

The new age of human life is described and explained by new terms and theories such as globalization, age of information explosion, age of media, postmodernism, information community and network community. Among these, the media plays a much more significant role. By controlling, handling, and directing the public as well as exciting and using it, the media plays a serious role in the domain of power. Today, this role has become more serious since media enjoys more variety in terms of number and quality. It covers a broad range of audio, visual, written and electronic media, each of which has its own audience. The Internet is one of the most influential modern communicative technologies which have substantially influenced all aspects of human life. The Internet has become an unrivalled means of communication due to its popularity among people and its wide geographical influence within national borders. The Internet has created sources of influence beyond the control of governments and power institutions in societies. Many thinkers believe that new forms of electronic media have created a new public space for societies and even the political community has been drastically influenced by this interaction. Empirical evidence shows that there is a sort of correlation between the growth of mass media and the development of democratic culture. Some researchers believe that the media is a prominent element of democracy. According to Manuel Castells, for example, all new policies go through the framework of electronic media. This interconnectedness of the life space and modern media have become so substantial that it has influenced the main aspects of life and changed politics which act as an important part of this space. The mass media connects different elements of democratic discourse and leads to the production of democratic behaviors and policies. BY enjoying from qualities such as interactivity, simultaneity of communication, accessibility, lack of central control, lack of ownership of the network, and avoidance of censorship, the Internet has created a good space for reviving the lost aspects of political cooperation and democracy in developed countries and support fledgling democracies in the developing societies. Thus lack of such media in society undermines the concept of democracy. The internet is making vast, drastic changes in the nature, forms and structures of power in different developed and developing countries and this has encouraged researchers to inquire about how and how much these changes will affect people and what are the current and future impacts of the Internet on the political life of societies. Thus this study attempts to investigate the relationship between the internet usage and political participation among students of the University of Isfahan.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study is a survey research. The population comprises of all undergraduate, postgraduate and

PhD students of the University of Isfahan in all majors in the academic year 2011-2012. The sample comprises of 147 students selected by

cluster random sampling in which, first, 185 students were selected as the initial sample and then, after discarding flawed questionnaires, 147 individuals were included in the final analysis. Each faculty was considered as a cluster. In the next step, each class in that faculty was taken as one cluster. Considering research theoretical framework, research questions are as follows: Does the type of Internet usage have any relationship with political awareness, political discussion, and internal/external political effectiveness? If there is a relationship between the type of Internet usage and aspects of political participation? What impacts does the use of the Internet have on political awareness, political discussion, and internal/external political effectiveness?

By Internet usage and political participation, we mean the score one obtains in the Internet use and political participation questionnaires. Due to the significance and sensitivity of the subject, we used two specific questionnaires of Internet use and political participation. In order to measure students' political participation, a questionnaire including 22 items was used. Amanda Zima's (2006) political cooperation model was used in

designing this questionnaire. In order to determine the validity and reliability of the research tools, first a number of questions were designed by individuals such as some of the professors of political sciences at the University of Isfahan and then after discussing and investigating them, 22 questions were selected. Then they were experimentally tested on a group of 40 (20 female and 20 male) students. The Peterson's reliability coefficient of the questionnaire varies between 0.44 and 0.69. Likewise, the reliability coefficient of this scale is measured by the Cronbach's alpha method. The questionnaire is divided into three categories of political awareness, political discussion and political effectiveness (internal and external).

#### Discussion of Results and Conclusions

As is shown in Table no. 1, the descriptive features of the research sample indicate that 88 of the participants were male and 59 were female. Also, 85 of the participants were MA students. The mean and the standard deviation of the participants' age was 23.08 and 7.31, respectively. The mean and the standard deviation of income for all the sample was 386547.08 and 216715.13, respectively.

**Table 1. Descriptive features of the sample**

variable	frequency	Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
gender	male	88	Age	23/08
	female	59	Monthly income in Tomans	386547/08
education	undergraduate	85		216715/13
	MA. students	42		
	PhD students	20		

The present study attempts to investigate the impacts of the Internet on the aspects of political awareness, political discussion and political effectiveness among students of the University of Isfahan. The findings reveal that there is a significant relation between the use of the Internet and different aspects of social participation. These

findings correspond to the findings of other empirical studies conducted by Loypa and Pilot 2002, Noris 2000, Pasek et al. 2006, Gibson et al. 2005, Luskin 1990, Daverz 2007. In fact, the Internet reduces costs of communications and understanding of the information. It produces better opportunities for social participation and

thus develops new groups and increase democratic participation.

The findings also reveal that recreational programs cause a decrease in political participation. In this regard, although the relation between recreational use and its impact on internal and external political effectiveness is not significant, as the findings show, individuals who use recreational programs (e.g. Internet games, movies, chatting, etc.) more than others, have lower political awareness and engage in less political discussions in proportion to those who do not use such media. These findings correspond to the findings of studies by Wick et al. 2001, Mautz 2002, Putnam 2000. It seems that networks, groups, and communication among users of social networks do not follow national boundaries the way the old media did. Weblogs, Facebook, Twitter, Friendfeeds, etc. are among websites which have a great potential for establishing networks on the Internet. Sometimes these networks act as institutions to confront political maturity. Therefore, according to the findings of this study, those individuals who use the Internet for recreational purposes have a lower sense of responsibility toward social problems and the society in general. Thus, it could be concluded that one of the consequences of the phenomenon of addiction to entertainment websites is political isolation.

In this regard, as autonomous power centers, social networks help enhance the personalization of policy. In this process, politics serves as a show and the audience serves as the spectators. In these social networks, politics is not normally analyzed as a rational process. Rather, it mostly acts as a set of symbolic measures to which people react. Under the influence of these social networks, people appeal more to the media and become isolated. It seems that the logic of social networks depends on hindering all kinds of discourses ruling over the political system. In addition, contrary to "old" holistic media, social networks lack public spaces where all people could get involved in dialogues and discussions.

The research findings reveal that the use of news channels and training programs enhances political awareness and internal/external political effectiveness among citizens. Studies conducted by Pulat 2005, Gibson et al. 2005, Daverz 2007 and Solop 2000 corroborate the relation between

these variables. By conveying information and news about events in a correct and precise way, training and news channels enhance people's awareness of themselves and of political authorities and by receiving people's opinions and conveying them to the authorities they create a sense of political effectiveness and liberty in the public toward the government. In a public space and in a set of coordinating factors, scientific and news media are able to play a significant part in establishing trust between the people and the government and encourage people to have more participation. Besides, by training the citizens and explaining to them what benefits the media have for all aspects of their lives, these media can also foster the necessary motivation for political participation.

In sum, the modern media have strangely changed the procedures of people's political participation and have blended them with the cyberspace in such a way that in each election different candidates and parties try to use the Internet as the best place for their political advertising. By controlling the direction of the society's political culture in order to achieve harmony with the political system, such media is able to help create motivation, and unify and direct people towards the main goals of the system. They can be at the service of the system to use most of the society's potentials.

**Keywords:** Cyberspace The Internet, Political Participation, Mass Media,

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