Connecting, Informing, and Mobilizing Youth and the Advantaged:  
The role of the Internet in political engagement  
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The Internet may re-invigorate civic life by increasing access to political information, facilitating political discussion, developing social networks, and offering alternative and convenient venues for political engagement. Two theories explain how the Internet could have a positive impact on political life. The theories have different implications on political inequality. One theory is that the Internet will facilitate or reinforce engagement among those people who are already interested, knowledgeable, and engaged in civic life. This argument finds some support in the findings that the wealthy, the educated, and men are more likely to use the Internet, particularly for finding civic and political information. As such, political inequalities seem to be replicated by Internet use. Another theory is that the Internet will reduce the costs of accessing political information and engaging in political activities, which may entice a broader set of citizens to become politically engaged. For example, the easy access to information and the online information exchange process may reduce the prerequisite level of political interest required to become politically informed. In these ways, the Internet could reduce political inequalities by expanding political knowledge and engagement. This theory finds some support in the findings that the relationship of visiting news websites and political expression is stronger for young people, compared to other age groups. A secondary source of support for this theory is the finding that low-income people are as likely and frequently to use the Internet to find government information, compared to their advantaged counterparts.

This research uses data from the Canadian General Social Survey 2000 and a meta-analysis of existing research. While the findings offer some support for reducing political inequality, the overall findings suggest that the advantaged are reaping the greatest benefit from Internet use. Instead of broadening the characteristics of political actors, Internet use seems to transform additional members of advantaged groups into political actors. The analysis offers several solutions for enabling disadvantaged and disengaged groups to use the Internet in civic ways, such as expanding computer skills, which are demonstrated to have a strong effect on likelihood of Internet use and civic uses of the Internet. Copies of dissertations may be obtained by addressing your request to ProQuest, 789 E. Eisenhower Parkway, P.O. Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346. Telephone 1-800-521-3042; email: disspub@umi.com