

The Internet as a social and political field – the consequences of capital

By

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Introduction – Political participation on the Internet and the question of resources

The Internet plays an increasingly larger role in daily life and is beginning to make an impact on political life as well. There have been widespread hopes that the new technology will help break down barriers and hierarchies, facilitate easier access to the political field and motivate new groups for civic involvement and political action. As such the Internet has been associated with a renewal and strengthening of civil society.¹

Recently we have seen an upsurge of campaigns for human rights, petitions, political chat-rooms, city networks and various other kinds of political activity, all mediated via the Internet. Many of these activities have undoubtedly proved quite successful and have demonstrated that political influence certainly can be achieved via online action². However, so far the identity of online activists remains an open question. Are they new actors on the political scene who used to be marginalised in the “physical” political world due to the lack of adequate resources? Are they young people who are normally less politically active than the rest of the population but are attracted due to the “glamour” of the new media? Or are they the chosen few, the “gladiators” who have found another medium for their political involvement?³

In this paper I try to examine some of these questions based on a survey of participants in *Minnesota E-democracy*. The project is generally considered to be among the most successful attempts to create democratic dialogue within a given regional area. At the same time it is probably the longest ongoing initiative on electronic democracy and it currently involves about 2000 participants, among those many leading politicians, civil servants and media people.⁴

Before starting the investigations, I will briefly discuss a little more in detail the theories of political participation and the specific potential of the Internet.

Political participation online and “in real life”

The concept of political participation is heavily debated and contested. There is no basic agreement on the ideal character of political participation. Concerning the rationale behind political participation, developmental views emphasize the educational and enlightening aspects of political participation, whereas instrumental views

1. Dyson (1998: 45-46), Graham (1999: 66-70).

2. Examples are various human rights and privacy petitions against censorship and control, lively debate forums like The Well and Minnesota E-democracy and new social movements like ATTAC that to a large extent are mobilising new members via the Internet.

3. Early accounts on political participation invented that term to denote those few, who were politically active in several ways. Quoted from (Bogdanor 1993): 461-62.

4. For an earlier account on Minnesota E-democracy, see (Dahlberg 2001).

claim that the purpose of political participation is the representation of the citizens' interests and values.⁵

Although theorists like Schumpeter have claimed that too much political participation is counter-productive to effective government, most scholars agree that extensive political participation is a prerequisite of modern democracy. Advocates of the instrumental view have often stressed that modern democracy works well as long as there are no formal barriers to political participation.⁶ Thinkers inspired by the developmental view emphasize, however, that democracy is something more than formal procedures and that democratic debates and public discourse are necessary elements in achieving a well-working democracy.⁷

Whatever the views on the ideal form of democratic participation many observers have focused on the "participation crisis" experienced in Western democracies during the last 40 years. Among the characteristics are political apathy and a decline in party membership and civic involvement.⁸ The condition has been labelled a democracy of spectatorship rather than one of participation.⁹ Among the explanations often proposed are the many barriers between citizens and the political establishment, the complexity of modern society and the scarce resources available to ordinary citizens.

Furthermore, a wide range of scholars have focused on the significance of personal resources, most notably socio-economic status and level of education, for political participation.¹⁰ Others emphasize factors such as specific competences or personal motivation to account for differences in participation among apparently similar people.¹¹

In this context it has been suggested that the Internet is a powerful tool for increasing political participation and strengthening the links between civil society and the political establishment. The Internet is characterised by non-hierarchy, instancy and smoothness and thus well-suited to break down old barriers. The immense amount of information, it is argued, can empower citizens and diminish the information asymmetry between citizens and decision-makers. On the Internet physical resources loose significance and the importance of social status diminishes as participants can remain anonymous.¹²

5. Bogdanor (1993: 461).

6. See Dahl (1973).

7. The view is presented in Habermas (1975).

8. This view is for example presented and discussed by Putnam (2001).

9. Torpe & Goul Andersen (2000).

10. See Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995: 269-272) and Bourdieu (1984: 407-10).

11. For general discussions of these issues, see Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995) and Bogdanor (1993: 461-62).

12. It is impossible to provide a detailed discussion of all these well-known arguments here. Among texts where these issues are discussed are Rheingold (1993), Dyson (1998) and Graham (1999).

In the following I will discuss whether these democratic promises of the Internet show any signs of being fulfilled. How does online political participation differ from more traditional forms?

Are groups previously alienated from the political system motivated for political and civic involvement or do mainly the “gladiators” participate? And which factors determine online participation compared to those that determine more traditional participation?

To answer these questions I first investigate the resources available to participants in *Minnesota E-democracy* and whether they are a representative sample of the US and Minnesota population in general. To accomplish this I draw on a specific framework for measuring personal resources, the forms of capital sketched by Pierre Bourdieu.

I then look at the participants’ political activities and compare with general data on political participation in the US to examine whether they are new political actors, gladiators or something in between. These operations I should allow me to conclude on whether personal resources matter as much for online participation as they do for more traditional forms of political involvement. To make a stronger argument and determine just how representative *Minnesota E-democracy* is for online participation in general, I include some figures from my studies of similar Danish cases of E-democracy.¹³

Lastly I turn to the question whether online participation requires specific characteristics or competences. Access to the Internet is an obvious prerequisite, but it is also worth to investigate whether the location of access, amount of time spent online or media competence in general have any effect on online political participation. In other words: are there any remarkable differences within the groups of participants on *Minnesota E-democracy*? This enables me to conclude on the barriers for online political participation.

Some words about case and method

To investigate the research questions outlined above it is natural to look at a case like *Minnesota E-democracy* where the democratic process seems to work relatively well and where there are several examples that online discussions have led to or changed political decisions. However, the participants have never been surveyed to elucidate whether *Minnesota E-democracy* also fulfils the Internet’s promises of democratic inclusion and mobilisation of new groups. Almost 2000 people participate in *Minnesota E-democracy* and it was hence possible to obtain a relatively large sample for the survey among a big group of people.

People participate in *Minnesota E-democracy* by subscribing to one or more of four e-mail lists: Minneapolis Issues List, St. Paul Issues List, Winona Online

13. The two cases are the private initiative dk.politik and the government-sponsored initiative Nordpol.dk. I have investigated these cases as a part of my Ph.D.-project. The results are presented in (Linaa Jensen 2002).

Democracy and Minnesota Politics Discussions. A total of 1834 people subscribed when the survey was launched.

A proportional random sample of 50 percent of the subscribers was taken from each list. Of this sample of 917, 89 were duplicates (subscribing to several lists), 51 of the e-mail addresses were invalid, and nine stated actively that they did not want to participate. Of the remaining 768 respondents, 256 chose to participate, leaving us with 33.3 percent. Of the 256 replies, 14 were incomplete and N for the statistical procedures is down to 242.

Finally, I shall address a major methodological challenge in online surveys, the issue of representativity. Participants in net debates are of course not representative for the population in general. The purpose of this investigation is to describe some of the differences that might be. In this survey it is very importance to ensure a representative sample of the participants on *Minnesota E-democracy*. Using proportional random sampling I have struggled to achieve that but one can always argue that the most active participants are also those who tend to answer surveys. However, the statistics show that I have managed to capture a lot of “lurkers”, those not actively participating in the debates. 47.5 percent of the respondents rarely post and 19 percent never post. In other words, I believe that my sample is representative.

The participants on Minnesota E-democracy – capital and other resources

We now turn to the participants. First I address the fundamental resources, which I shall refer to as capital, and then I discuss other interesting characteristics. The aim is to describe whether and how the participants on *Minnesota E-democracy* differ from the population in general, and the figures are therefore compared with similar ones for the US and Minnesotan populations.¹⁴

The concept of capital as a measure of personal resources is most recently associated with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu the amount and composition of capital determines an individual’s position and possibilities within certain social fields.

Bourdieu distinguishes between three forms of capital: economic, cultural and social. Economic capital refers to material resources such as income, cultural capital to formation and education and social capital to the relative position and societal status of the individual.¹⁵ He adds a fourth form, symbolic capital, which is an aggregate of the three and determines which position an individual has within a given field. The relative importance of a given form of capital varies for different fields. For example, according to Bourdieu, there is a close relation between cultural capital and a dominant position within the political field.

14. Where possible, the comparisons are made with Minnesota data as the composition of the Minnesotan population differs from the general US population. Minnesotans are generally better educated and have the fourth highest average income in the United States, according to the US census of 2002.

15. (Järvinen 2000): 349.

Using the theoretical apparatus of capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu it is possible to sketch the participants' position in the general social field and to describe online participation as a political field. In this section I discuss what characterises the Internet, represented by *Minnesota E-democracy*, as a social field. What characterises its participants compared to the wider social field of the entire society? In the next section I examine the Internet as a political field comparing *Minnesota E-democracy* and the field of traditional political participation. I shall define economic capital as income, cultural capital as education level and social capital as the respondents' self-identification of citizen status.

Economic capital

The income level of *Minnesota E-democracy's* users is higher than of the rest of the population. Figure 1 shows that among the participants there are more persons within the four upper income categories than in the Minnesotan as well as the US populations in general. Further, we see that the average household income in Minnesota is about 25 percent higher than the national average, \$52,681 versus \$42,228.¹⁶

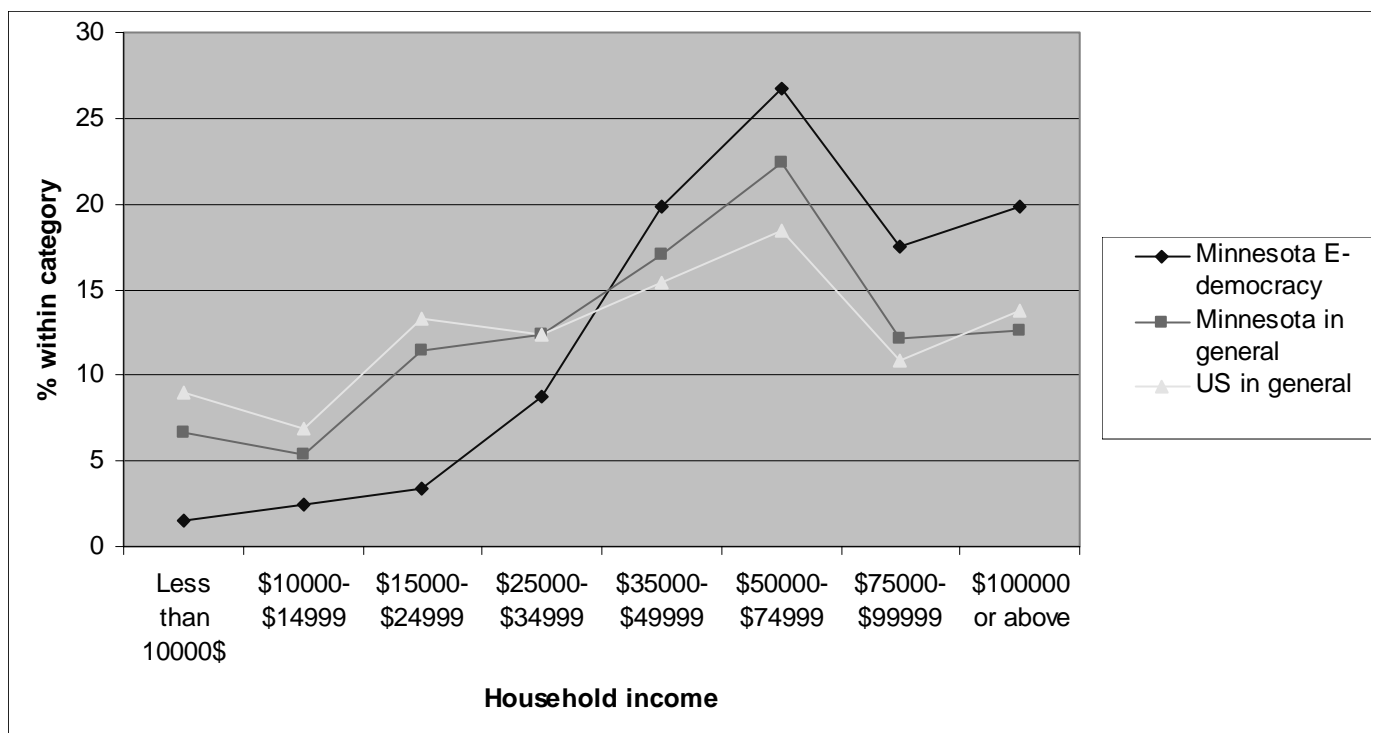


Figure 1 – Income distribution for participants of *Minnesota E-democracy* versus Minnesotan and US population in general

16. Based on US census data, source <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p60-218.pdf> and <http://censtats.census.gov/data/MN/04027.pdf#page=3>, links checked 20 February 2003.

Cultural capital

The concept of cultural capital is here investigated by examining the education level of participants as they are asked about the highest level of education attained. The frequencies are presented in Table 1 and compared with the general education level in Minnesota.

There is a remarkable overweight of people with college degrees. More than 80 percent hold degrees and 45 percent have post-graduate or professional degrees, where the corresponding figures for Minnesota are 35 and 8 percent.¹⁷ There is almost none with only a high school certificate or lower.

Table 1: The educational background of the participants (percent).

	Minnesota E-democracy	Minnesota in general
11 years of schooling or less	0	12.0
Vocational education	1.3	0
High school / merchant school	0.4	28.8
Advanced studies, 1-2 years	17.6	24.0
Advanced studies, 3-4 years	35.6	26.8
Advanced studies, 5 years or more	45.1	8.3
	N=233	0

The table confirms that the participants are extremely well educated, even compared to the Minnesotan population whose education level is higher than that in the US in general. To examine whether this tendency is specific to *Minnesota E-democracy* or is general for online participation, it is worth looking at similar figures for two Danish cases. Here the share of participants with post-graduate or professional degrees is about 50 percent, and a total of 55 percent have done advanced studies. Only 9 percent have eleven years of schooling or less. Even though the Danish participants seem to have a slighter lower education level than those in Minnesotan it is important to remember that the general education level in the US is higher than in other industrialized countries. In 1994 24 percent of the US population aged 25 to 64 had a university education while the figure for Denmark is 14 percent. Conversely, the figures for high school education or lower are 68 percent versus 80 percent.¹⁸ I thus conclude that a very high level of cultural capital characterises participants in online debates across countries.

Social capital

It is quite difficult to measure social capital. A comprehensive measurement of social position and status should account for many different highly subjective factors

17. For comparison purposes the term “advanced studies” are used within the table.

18. (Ranney 2000): 769.

and would probably require an extensive qualitative, interview-based method. However, as we are dealing with the political field, it seems natural to define social capital in terms of status and competences related to that area. Therefore the respondents are asked to estimate their own status as citizens. Most importantly, the citizens are asked whether they feel most like “average” or “activist citizen”. Besides, as many politicians, civil servants and journalists participate in the forums of *Minnesota E-democracy* as well, they are asked to identify themselves in order to investigate how many they are and whether their activities in the debates differ from those of other groups. The frequencies for self-identified status are shown in Figure 2.

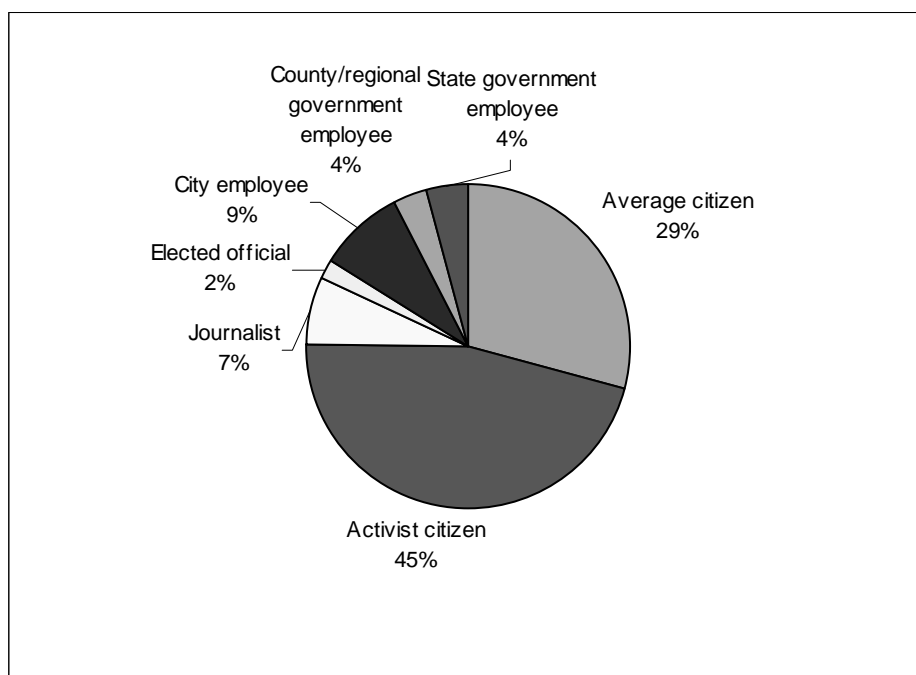


Figure 2 – The participants’ self-identification of social status

We see that about three-quarters of the participants identify themselves as citizens. Of those about 60 percent identify themselves as activists and 40 percent as average citizens. Altogether 17 percent are public employees and 2 percent are elected officials. Finally, 7 percent of the participants are journalists. Unfortunately no similar data are available for Minnesota or the US in general, but it seems fair to assume that activist citizens are heavily over-represented. I shall return to more general comparisons with data on political participation in the next section.

The figures tell us that *Minnesota E-democracy* attracts a large share of activist citizens but it seems as if average citizens participate as well. More interesting, a fair share of city, county or state employees follow the debates and even some elected politicians are active. The survey question does not take into account whether these groups participate qua their positions or as interested citizens. However, their mere presence indicates that *Minnesota E-democracy* is more than just a “virtual coffee

house” for internal debates among citizens with no contact to the political establishment.

Other characteristics of *Minnesota E-democracy* participants

Besides the participants’ composition of capital it is useful to broaden the picture by addressing other important characteristics of the participants. I will shortly touch upon gender, age and race.

A much proclaimed bias of the Internet is the user gender gap. In the beginning the typical Internet user was a highly educated, white male. As these differences tend to diminish as especially more and more women go online, it is natural to ask whether this bias applies to online participation as well.

The gender distribution on *Minnesota E-democracy* is 57.7 percent male and 42.3 percent female versus 49.5 percent and 50.5 percent for the Minnesotans in general. To shed light on whether there is a trend towards a more equal gender distribution in online political participation it is interesting to look at data from my studies of Danish cases. Even though the present rates of Internet access in the population are about the same in Denmark and the US,¹⁹ it can be argued that there is a longer tradition of Internet use in the U.S. More importantly, however, *Minnesota E-democracy* has been online for eight years whereas the Danish case Nordpol.dk went online in September 2001. It seems that there is an equalizing effect on gender distribution over time, as surveys of the Danish cases show that 79 percent of the participants were men and only 21percent were women. Hence online participation follows the trend of Internet activity in general.

Concerning age, the median age of *Minnesota E-democracy* users is 42.8 years versus 35.4 for Minnesota population in general. It should be noted, however, that it would be quite unnatural to participate in a political activity like *Minnesota E-democracy* until the age of about 16-18, and controlled for that factor my conclusion is that the participants fit into the age distribution of the general population. When excluding the age category from zero to 18 the participants might even prove to be slightly younger.

The last topic to be addressed here is race. 96 percent of the participants are white while the equivalent figure for Minnesota in general is 89 percent.²⁰ Among other races specifically African Americans and Hispanics are under-represented. If not dominated by white males, *Minnesota E-democracy* is definitely dominated by whites.

In sum, participants on *Minnesota E-democracy* possess more capital than the general population. Especially cultural capital defined as education really seems to

19. The latest figures are 59.1% online in the US (April 2002) and 62.7% online in Denmark (July 2002). Source: NUA and Nielsen NetRatings at http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/n_america.html, link checked February 20th 2003.

20. Based on US census data 2000 for Minnesota accessed on <http://censtats.census.gov/data/MN/04027.pdf#page=1>, link checked February 20th 2003.

matter, a finding which does not come a big surprise in view of existing literature on political participation.²¹ In Figure 3 I try to portrait these tendencies graphically by plotting the participants on *Minnesota E-democracy* into a model of the general social field.

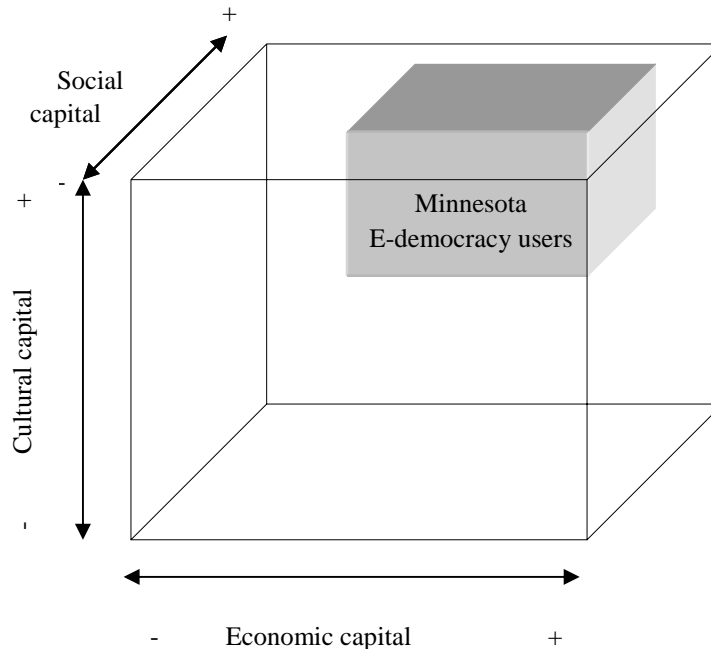


Figure 3: The situation of Minnesota E-democracy participants within the general social field.

The immediate impression of *Minnesota E-democracy* is that marginalised groups and those poor on resources are not mobilised politically like some of the advocates of the Internet would claim. Rather it seems that the forum is dominated by the “gladiators”, those rich on capital who also dominate other areas of the political life. In order to go deeper into these questions it is necessary to regard *Minnesota E-democracy* as a political field by comparing it with the field of traditional political participation, an operation to which we now turn.

Traditional versus online political participation

Previous sporadic studies of participants in online political discussions have often focused on the material resources of participants, and based on general demographics it has been shown that only “the chosen few” join in.²² Our analysis in the previous chapter tends to confirm such conclusions. So far, however, very few analyses have touched upon whether the participants are active in other ways than via the Internet and very little relevant data therefore exists. By comparing data on the

21. See for example Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995).

22. Just a couple of examples: Hoff, Löfgren & Johansen (1998) and their investigation of the use of Internet in Danish local elections (1997); Hill & Hughes (1998) and their inquiries of participants in American online political life.

wider political activity level of participants with figures on political participation in general we should here be able to further qualify our conclusions on the characteristics of the E-democracy participants and the mobilising effects of the Internet in general.

In the following I compare the political interests and traditional and online participation among *Minnesota E-democracy* users with available data on political participation in society in general. Again I include figures from the Danish cases where relevant in order to test the representativity of *Minnesota E-democracy* as a case of online political participation.

Political interest

First and foremost it is natural to ask whether *Minnesota E-democracy* is dominated by persons who are especially interested in politically interested persons. Table 2 shows that 96 percent are very or to some extent interested in politics. This trend is probably general for online political participation as the equivalent figure for one of the Danish cases is 98 percent. For comparison purposes, in Denmark 72 percent are very or somewhat interested in politics. For the US the closest equivalent measure of political interest is an index score of 5.8.²³

Table 2: Political interest of the participants (percent).

Question: Do you consider yourself interested in politics and/or community affairs?	Danish cases	Minnesota
Yes, very much	64.7	70.6
Yes, to some extent	33.3	24.8
Not really	0	4.2
Not at all	2	0.4
Index score*	7.2	7.3
	N=51**	N=238

* The index score is calculated in order to compare the respondents' political interest with available scores for general political interest in the US. The categories from "yes, very much" to "Not at all" are given values 8, 6, 4 and 2 and the weighted average is computed.

** Only data available for dk.politik.

Even when using different measures for comparison it is clear that political interest among online participants in the US as well as in Denmark is about 30 percent higher than in the general population. Having thus concluded that *Minnesota E-democracy* participants are particularly interested in politics, we move on to investigate their patterns of political participation.

To get an overview of central tendencies it can be useful to distinguish between formal and informal political participation. It is, of course, difficult to distinguish exactly between the two forms. It could be argued that consultation processes

23. Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995: 349 & 553) and Torpe & Goul Andersen (2000: 159).

(contacting a politician or civil servant) is a formal form of political participation, whereas membership of a grassroots organisation could be considered more informal. I have chosen to define the kinds of participation that include more binding commitment (membership etc.) and constitutionally defined forms (for example voting) as formal. Among them we find voting, party or organisation membership and candidacy for electoral office. Among the informal forms are discussing politics with friends etc., writing letters to the editor and attending town meetings.

Scholars have argued that in the last 30-40 years we have seen a decline in formal forms of participation and a rise in informal ones.²⁴ Table 3 seeks to give an overview of different forms of political participation among *Minnesota E-democracy* participants and compare them to available data for the US and Denmark. Again, the figures from the Danish cases are included to strengthen the conclusions about Internet participants in general.

Table 3: The political activity of the participants

Question asked: in which ways have you been politically active during the last 12 months?	<i>Minnesota</i>	<i>Danish cases*</i>	<i>USA**</i>	<i>Denmark***</i>
<i>Formal political participation</i>				
Voted in the most recent election	93%	-	53-59%	70-86%
Member of a political party	63%	30%	5%	5%
Member of organisation, grass root movement etc.	45%	18%	14%	23%
Member of users' councils etc.	31%	7%	31%	11%
Member of or candidate for parliament, county council or city council	8%	7%	-	-
<i>Informal political participation</i>				
Discussing politics with friends, family and colleagues	93%	79%	-	80%
Participating in town meetings, hearings and other political meetings	71%	31%	18%	27%
Contacting a politician or a civil servant regarding a political matter	74%	25%	27%	22%
Writing a letter to the editor	41%	14%	-	8%
<i>Other political activities online</i>				
	66%	49%		
	N=241	N=136		

* Each respondent was asked to "check all that apply". Total percentage is hence more than 100.

** Data taken from Ranney (2000: 750) and Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995: 63-76).

*** Andersen (2000: 28); Goul Andersen & Tobiasen (2001: 37-38) and Torpe & Goul Andersen (2000: 160).

24. Bogdanor (1993: 461-62).

The first and obvious trend is that the *Minnesota E-democracy* users are extremely active within formal forms of participation. 93 percent voted in the most recent election while only 53-59 percent of the US population at large did. 63 percent are members of or in other ways affiliated with political parties while the best estimate for the remainder of the population is 5 percent. Finally, 45 percent are members of organisations or grassroots movements, a figure three times higher than for people outside *Minnesota E-democracy*.

The participants are no less active in more informal types of political engagement. Almost three-quarters have attended town meetings or other political meetings and a similar number have consulted politicians or civil servants regarding a political matter. Again, among Minnesotan participants political activity is three to four times higher than in the US population.

These trends for online participants however become less clear when bringing in the data from the Danish cases. The Danish participants seem to be much more active than the general population only in the area of party membership. The figures for formal participation forms like membership of organisations and user councils are similar to those seen in the population in general. Turning to the informal forms of participation, the only remarkable trend is the level of activity of writing letters to the editor: 14 percent versus 8 percent for the population in general.

Before concluding too firmly that the Minnesotan participants are much more politically active than their Danish counterparts it must be noted that several of the figures used for comparison are taken from different surveys and that phenomena like organisation activity, political meetings and user councils are not always defined in exactly the same way. The data used were the best available and in my opinion quite precise and updated, but they are only useful to give an estimate of the online participants compared to wider society.

Additionally, the differences in political participation between Denmark and the US must be taken into account. In Denmark voter turnouts are traditionally very high and there is (or used to be) a tradition for participating in political meetings. On the other hand, the US has a strong tradition for community involvement.²⁵ It is not always easy to define whether or not US voluntary organisations are political. Furthermore, in the US the distinction between community and political activities is not as clear-cut as it is in Denmark. Those factors have affected the formulation of questions in the different surveys and can for example help explain the huge difference in user council membership across the cases. Once again, the Danish cases are not included to provide all-encompassing cross-national comparisons but to see the data from *Minnesota E-democracy* in a broader context of online political participation.

The overall impression when comparing online and “real life” participation is that the two fields are highly interdependent. It seems to be the same “gladiators” from existing forms of political participation who flock to the new medium as they

25. As discussed by (Putnam 2001).

see it as yet another opportunity to be heard and achieve influence. We can therefore not confirm the often heard claim that marginalised groups normally alien to political participation will use the Internet as a new and more accessible way of becoming involved in political matters. The traditional economic, educational and social effects on political participation²⁶ seem to be carried over to online participation, as per our conclusions from section one.

The political fields online and “in real life”

As we have seen, there is close correspondence between the online and “real life” political fields. A last topic to be addressed is the scope of the online political field compared to the total political field. Online political activity is still a phenomenon in its infancy, but in order to evaluate the potential of online participation to replace more traditional forms, the obvious route is to investigate the development among political participants who are front runners in the online field.

The participants in *Minnesota E-democracy* were asked whether they participated in 10 traditional and 10 online political activities. The answers presented in figure 4 give us a measure for the substitution of traditional for online activities in a group which must be regarded as “front runners”.

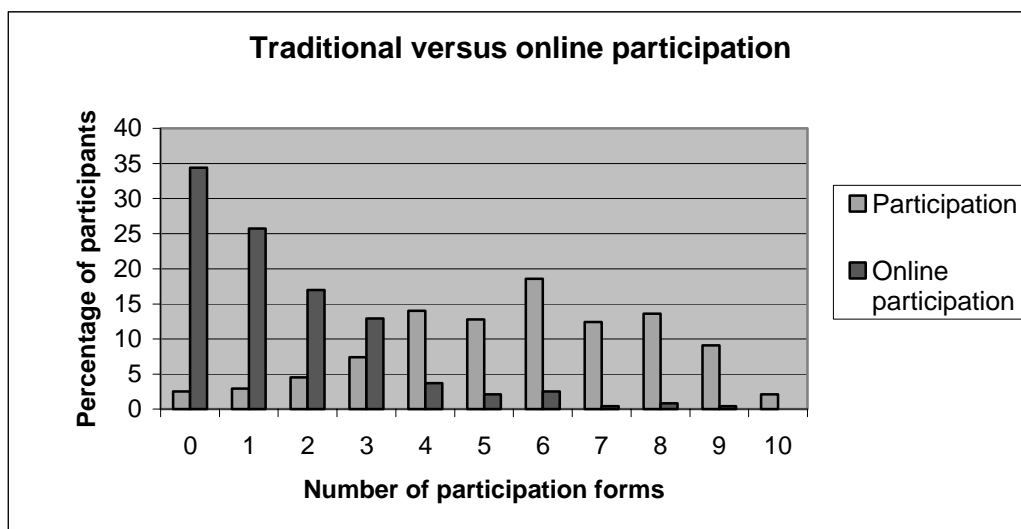


Figure 4 – Traditional versus online participation among participants.

The picture is clear: traditional political activities are only to a limited extent replaced by online political involvement. The participants' average number of traditional activities is almost four times higher than the corresponding number for online involvement, 5.82 versus 1.58. Instead of a substitution, online political involvement seems to supplement a steady high level of political activity in general. In Figure 5 I continue the graphic presentation from the previous section. We know from the

26. Goul Andersen (2000: 38). The same trends can be found in the US (Verba et al., 1995: 349).

literature that the political field is determined by the same capital factors as the general social field, most notably by cultural capital. This factor is incorporated on the axes of the box. We have to imagine the political field as situated in the upper right corner of the general social field. Within that political field, the online political field is (still) only a limited subfield where particularly cultural and social capital matters.

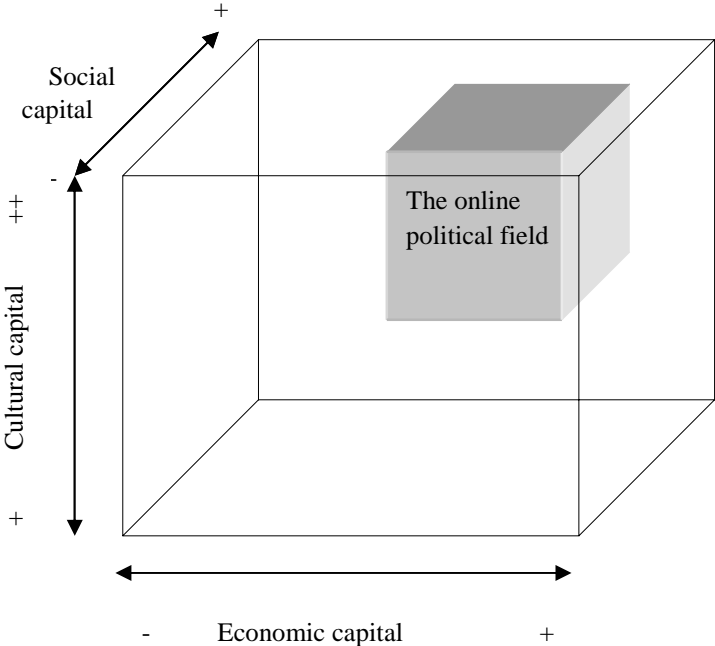


Figure 5: The political field and the “online political” subfield.

Inside the field of online participation

We have seen that most participants on *Minnesota E-democracy* fall into the category of gladiators. However, within the group participation seems to enhance political interest and activity. 68 percent say that it has made them more interested in political or community issues, 91 percent that their knowledge of political or community issues has increased and 46 percent believe that *Minnesota E-democracy* has had a positive effect on their overall civic involvement. 86 percent feel they have gained increased knowledge of other people’s opinions and as a result 53 percent now have more respect for those whose opinions differ from their own.

In other words, participation in *Minnesota E-democracy* seems to be highly developmental, contributing to the political enlightenment and education of participants. Finding such effects on a group of mainly politically active, interested and knowing people is undoubtedly an indication that online democracy projects might have a similar effect on those less politically interested and informed. It makes the question of mobilisation even more interesting. I will now address which specific competences determine online participation, and I then turn to the question whether

different resources and competences affect the activity level even within the group of online participants.

I leave the framework of Pierre Bourdieu for a moment and try to get an overview of some of the more specific competences required to engage in online political activities (and probably online activities in general). All participants obviously have access to the Internet but it is also interesting to determine where and how they access it as well as how much and in what ways they use it.

Not surprisingly, a vast majority of the participants, more than 90 percent, use the Internet on a daily basis. Further, more than 75 percent indicate that they use the Internet several times a day, not least to check e-mail. As other surveys have documented, e-mail is the most popular activity among Internet users.²⁷ 93 percent of the participants check their e-mail every day, 77 percent several times a day. Browsing websites is another popular activity performed by 90 percent of the participants on a daily basis, 66 percent of them several times a day. The use of Instant Messaging is much less frequent. 58 percent never use it and only 14 percent use it on a daily basis.

The figures indicate that extensive and daily Internet use is a prerequisite for participating in online political discussions. The impression that the E-democracy participants are in fact “super users” is confirmed by the numbers in Table 4, which lists where the Internet is accessed. 71.7 percent are super users who are online from home as well as from work, school or similar. The equivalent figure for U.S. Internet users is 45.5 percent and only 24.5 percent for the U.S. population in general.

Table 4) Types of users based on places of access for Minnesota E-democracy users and the U.S. (Percent).

	Minnesota E-democracy	U.S. Internet users*	U.S. population
No access	0	0	46.1
Out-of-home user	12.0	19.1	10.3
Home user	16.3	35.4	19.1
Home and out-of-home user	71.7	45.5	24.5
	N=233		

* Data extracted from “A Nation Online” by the U.S. Department of Commerce, February 2002, available at <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/html/Chapter4.htm>

Moreover, 52 percent of the participants on *Minnesota E-democracy* access the Internet via a broadband connection and hence have fast access to all the wonders of the Web. According to PEW Internet the equivalent figure for all US households is only 21 percent.²⁸

27. See “A Nation Online” by the U.S. Department of Commerce, February 2002, available at <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/html/Chapter3.htm>.

28. http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Broadband_Report.pdf, link checked 19 February, 2003.

As the participants obviously are very used to navigating on the Internet it is interesting to survey their general media competence, i.e. how many other media they use on a weekly basis. Although the figures are mainly used for the following analysis of factors that determine the level of participation within *Minnesota E-democracy*, it is interesting already now to examine the participants' use of specific media. Surprisingly in a U.S. context, television is not the most used media. Radio and newspapers attract 93 and 91 percent of the participants on a weekly basis, whereas television comes in third at 82 percent. Finally, 74 percent state that they read magazines or similar and 15 percent use other media.

In general, participants make frequent use of media other than the Internet. 65 percent use four or more different media every week. Interestingly, nobody answers that they use only the Internet, and once again, it does not seem as if the Internet replaces more traditional activities.

Explaining differences in online participation

In the preceding sections we have seen how participants in online activities differ from the population in general and how they to a large extent follow the patterns of traditional political participation. It would therefore be interesting to examine which differences we find within the group of online participants. Which factors determine how much they engage in online activities in general and *Minnesota E-democracy* in particular? Further, as a group within the "online" subfield of the political field, which factors determine their political interest and participation rates?

To explore these questions I have used the statistical method of MCA-analysis on four different dependent variables: participants' political interest, (traditional) political participation, online political participation and use of *Minnesota E-democracy*. For the two participation variables I have used the number of political activities in which the participants are involved (0-10) as an index. For political interest the index is constructed to measure the participants' interest on a scale from 0 to 10, and finally, the variable "Use of *Minnesota E-democracy*" is composed of three other variables: how often they access the forums in total, how often they participate actively, and how many forms of activities they have engaged in. The first two together and the last variable each account for half the index, which again has a range from 0 to 10.

In Table 5 I have sketched the results of the analysis for the significance of the resources income, education and status. For each dependent variable I have stated the adjusted and unadjusted means within each group and in total. However, there are almost no major differences between the two measures in any one field, indicating that there is little or no interplay between the independent variables. An exception is the group of participants with non-college education, but the low N (3) rather than hidden interactions most likely accounts for the variation. It makes good sense, then, to regard income, education and status as non-related factors, each contributing to explain the dependent variables.

Table 5. The significance of resources for factors of political participation

	Political interest		Political participation		Political participation online		Use of Minnesota E-democracy		N
	Unadj.	Adj.	Unadj.	Adj.	Unadj.	Adj.	Unadj.	Adj.	
<i>Income</i>									
<\$24999	9.73	9.70	6.00	6.00	1.67	1.55	6.03	6.02	15
\$25000-\$49999	9.27	9.24	5.63	5.57	1.75	1.68	6.04	6.02	55
\$50000 or more	9.33	9.35	5.88	5.91	1.49	1.53	5.97	5.97	128
<i>Education</i>									
Non-college	8.67	9.16	4.33	5.09	.00	.36	6.33	6.65	3
College	9.32	9.31	5.88	5.94	1.68	1.64	6.00	5.98	106
Post-graduate	9.39	9.39	5.80	5.70	1.51	1.54	5.97	5.98	89
<i>Status</i>									
Average citizen	8.55	8.56	4.40	4.40	1.09	1.11	5.59	5.57	58
Journalist	9.69	9.69	4.38	4.35	2.46	2.40	6.00	6.00	13
Civil servant / politician	9.45	9.44	6.10	6.13	1.53	1.56	5.93	5.92	40
Activist citizen	9.77	9.77	6.84	6.83	1.79	1.77	6.28	6.29	87
<i>Grand mean</i>	9.34		5.82		1.58		5.99		198

It seems that the largest variations for all four dependent variables are explained by status. Activist citizens score significantly higher on all indexes than average citizens do. Civil servants and journalists follow the same trend although not as markedly as activist citizens. An examination of the standardized beta coefficients makes it clear that status is significant for political interest, participation and use of *Minnesota E-democracy* on a 99 percent level and for online participation on a 95 percent level.

Education evidently matters as well. On all dependent variables except “Use of *Minnesota E-democracy*” participants with college and post-graduate degrees score higher than those without college education. Again the differences must not be over-estimated as there are only 3 participants within the category “non-college”.²⁹ There are no obvious differences across income categories, although the lowest income category’s average in general is slightly higher than the other. One could claim that once online, some of the participants with lower incomes become more involved than they do offline, although the tendency is not statistically significant.

We now turn to whether competences matter for activity among participants. The figures presented in Table 6 are calculated in much the same way as those above. The three independent variables are now Internet access (location), Internet use and Media competence. Again the average values within each group are presented

29. It was extremely difficult to collapse categories to show a range of educational levels and still get a sufficiently large sample within each group for statistical analyses. Once again, the extremely high educational level of the participants explains the low variance.

uncontrolled as well as controlled for the other independent variables. The almost total lack of differences tells us that there are no significant interactions between the independent variables.

Table 6) The significance of competences for factors of political participation

	Political interest		Political participation		Political participation online		Use of Minnesota E-democracy		N
	Unadj.	Adj.	Unadj.	Adj.	Unadj.	Adj.	Unadj.	Adj.	
<i>Internet access</i>									
Work / school user	9.59	9.59	5.55	5.56	1.10	1.13	5.931	5.95	29
Home user	9.30	9.24	5.54	5.44	1.46	1.58	5.824	5.80	37
Superuser	9.29	9.30	5.86	5.88	1.67	1.64	6.015	6.02	167
<i>Internet use</i>									
Occasional	10.00	9.97	7.00	6.95	.40	.20	6.700	6.67	5
Frequent	9.34	9.34	5.83	5.86	1.19	1.21	5.900	5.91	145
Intensive	9.28	9.27	5.59	5.55	2.30	2.27	6.060	6.04	83
<i>Media competence</i>									
Occasional	9.50	9.47	6.00	6.07	1.50	1.66	6.125	6.18	4
Frequent	9.12	9.13	5.52	5.52	1.22	1.24	5.795	5.81	73
Intensive	9.42	9.42	5.88	5.89	1.73	1.72	6.054	6.05	156
<i>Grand mean</i>	9.33		5.77		1.57		5.97		233

Table 6 reveals no clear tendencies for political interest and political participation. Interestingly, though, there is a statistically significant relationship between Internet use and online political participation. Although the tendency is not replicated for *Minnesota E-democracy* specifically, it tells us that the single most explanatory factor of online involvement is probably the degree of Internet use. Also the place of Internet access contributes to explaining the degree of political participation and use of *Minnesota E-democracy*. Once again, super users with access and use at home as well as at school or work are more active than the rest.

Conclusion - the Internet as a political field

I shall now briefly summarise the findings presented in this paper. The participants in *Minnesota E-democracy* generally have more resources than the population in general. More specifically, they are extremely well-educated compared to the rest of the population. As such they are placed in the upper right back corner of a three-dimensional social field, and it seems that the demographic patterns of online

participation follows the same trends as those of more traditional forms of political participation.

The online participants show a high level of activity within traditional forms of activities as well. It does not seem that online participation replaces more traditional forms, and as such the online political field can be regarded as a subfield within the general political field.

Whereas analyses of traditional political participation such as that carried out by Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995) and Bourdieu (1984) often emphasize cultural capital as the most determinant factor of political participation, I conclude that social capital, i.e. self-defined citizen status, is the single most important factor.³⁰

Among other resources that determine whether citizens become involved in political activities online, especially Internet use seems to affect online participation. The vast majority of the participants are super users who access the Internet both at home and at work or school.

In summary, study of online participants does not confirm the democratic promise that the Internet would mobilise new groups of people. Rather the gladiators now have yet another medium for political involvement and influence. Online participation, however, seems to have positive effect by strengthening political interest and involvement.

We can conclude by setting up four steps to determine whether an individual chooses to become involved in online participation:

1. Internet access
2. Resources, mainly education and social capital
3. Level of existing political participation
4. General competences and motivation for using new media

Even though it is obvious that the online possibilities make political involvement easier, it seems that in practice some new factors crop up when one seeks to formulate a set of explanations for political participation.

³⁰ One could argue that the construction of the variable tends to be somewhat tautological as for example, "activist citizens" tend to be very active. However, the categories are not constructed on the basis of participation but on the basis of self-experience of the participants within the political realm. This is probably one of the most precise and adequate single measures when investigating relative positions within the political field.

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