

PARTICIPATION, POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS AND THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET

Background and Objectives

The aims and objectives of this research were to investigate whether and how, a range of political organisations in the UK were using new Internet-related technologies to promote greater participation by their members and the wider public. This enhancement of participation was conceptualised in two main ways: a widening effect, such that the numbers of people involved in the political process were increasing; and a deepening effect, whereby the experience of participation itself was being enriched, strengthening participants sense of efficacy and involvement, and also increasing the significance and effectiveness of their activities. In doing so, the research also remained open to the possibility that the harnessing of the new technologies by these organisations might actually prove harmful to the quality and rate of participation in the UK. As well as creating a new barrier of IT literacy possibly cementing existing participation inequalities between rich and poor, it was recognised that these new modes of involvement, in removing the 'face-to-face' element of politics, might lead to the further erosion of individuals' commitment to the broader civic and social good.

In order to investigate these issues, a series of specific theoretical and empirical objectives were identified including:

- to develop established theoretical models of political participation by incorporating the role of technology in mobilising citizens.
- to establish how far the Internet is used by political organisations to promote political participation.
- to develop a new methodology to operationalise and measure the participatory aspects of political organisations' web-sites.
- to create a series of new data sets: i) an archive of UK political organisations' web-sites; ii) codification of web-site functions; iii) mass attitudes toward and usage of Internet-based forms of participation; iv) selected party/organisational members' attitudes toward and usage of Internet-based forms of participation; v) party organisational elites' (information officers) attitudes toward, and usage of Internet-based forms of participation; vi) web-site server statistics of users from organisations.
- to provide guidelines for the most effective usage of new ICTs by political organisations to promote participation.

Overall, the project has met almost all of these objectives, although some are still in progress and will be fulfilled with the completion of the book arising from the results of the project. Specifically:

1. development of existing theoretical models of political participation has been an ongoing concern in all output from project. The key questions we have sought to investigate are how traditional theories of participation, based on the offline world can help explain political activity in the online environment? Our response is most fully developed in a paper now under review at the *European Journal of Political Research* which presents a new model of online mobilisation, but will be further developed in the first chapter of the forthcoming book.
2. intensive analysis has been conducted on a wide range of political organisations in the UK over a 24 months via interviews, mail and online surveys of members, as well as regularised capture and content analysis of websites. This has resulted in a rich and varied dataset that allows us to compare how a range of parties, pressure groups and new social movements' are using new ICTs for participatory ends.

3. a single coding scheme applicable to all political organisations under investigation has been developed that provides clear and comparable measures of the participatory content of a website.
4. electronic datasets have been created for the project covering the following:
 - i) an archive of 30 political organisations websites has been created on CD-rom based on regular captures during the 24 months. The intervals between capture was extended from the monthly basis originally envisaged given the relatively minimal changes observed across such a short period.
 - ii) results from the website content analysis using the coding scheme. This was applied at each download, resulting 5 datasets (SPSS format);
 - iii) mass attitudes toward Internet-based participation. Gathered in a national opinion survey conducted by NOP on a random sample of the UK population in May 2002 (SPSS format). Although two surveys, 18 months apart were planned, after full costing, the economies of scale for fielding one large survey at the end of the project was considered a more cost-efficient use of resources.
 - iv) members attitudes toward Internet-based participation from 4 organisations using a combination of postal and web-based questionnaires with close-ended questions (SPSS format);
 - v) organisational elites' attitudes in a mail and e-mail questionnaire with close-ended responses (SPSS format) and semi-structured interviews with elites were conducted during the same time period with the data transcribed in MS Word files.
 - vi) web server statistics on patterns of use proved difficult to obtain due to organisations' unwillingness to release this information. Although one organisation, the Countryside Alliance, did allow access to such data.
5. A key theme of publications and presentations based on the project output has been to highlight the comparative usefulness of the different methods used by organisations to promote participation with the new ICTs. In the articles for *Parliamentary Affairs* and *The New Review of Information Networking*, as well as our 2001 and 2003 ECPR papers, we discuss in depth the strategic uses of email as opposed to website communication and the particular barriers (audience, organisational and technological) organisations have to overcome in order to better mobilise their constituents using new ICTs. These themes are also taken up more specifically in the special reports we produced for the Liberal Democrats, the Labour Party, the GPMU, the Countryside Alliance based on the membership surveys that we conducted. Finally, an NGOs Online event is to be held in September 2003 accompanied by an edited publication that has contributions from organisations and insiders, centring on the practical advantages of new ICTs for political organisations.

Methods

It was necessary first to identify the organisations to be studied and then devise a range of indicators that would provide evidence as to whether these groups were enhancing the rate and quality of participation through their use of new ICTs. This involved the creation and application of a variety of some traditional and new methodologies and collection and storage of data at three different levels:

- Evidence from the organisations themselves regarding their usage and deployment of the new ICTs for participatory purposes. The information sought was both subjective (i.e. personnel views and attitudes) and objective (i.e. identification and analysis of specific applications of the technology toward participatory ends).
- Evidence from the membership of these organisations regarding their willingness to use the new opportunities to participate, and the effects of these new types of participation.
- Evidence from the wider public as to whether they were aware of the new modes of participation used by organisations and how far they were willing to use them.

Selection of organisations:

In order to select the organisations to be studied, four distinct types were first identified: political parties; pressure or interest groups; new social movements; and looser protest networks and flash campaigns. These types were seen to form a continuum of institutionalisation, both in terms of internal operating structure, and externally vis a vis their role in the political system, with parties at the more formal end of the spectrum and the alternative non-mainstream players such as Reclaim the Streets at the more 'disorganised' end. Our findings were aimed at both within group and across group comparisons. While parties and established pressure groups, with their greater resources and fixed membership were expected to adopt a more cautious approach to the technology, using it mainly to better perform existing functions, the less organised groups, and particularly those that started after the Internet boom, were seen as more likely to experiment and exploit the new media in order to widen and strengthen their ability to communicate and coordinate with supporters.

The sample of organisations selected from each category was designed to maximise variance on a range of factors such as size, resources, ideology/policy orientation, and level of institutionalisation. This process resulted in 30 organisations being in scope:

- 6 parties – the three major parties, plus the Scottish National Party, the Greens and British National Party;
- 18 pressure groups and new social movements – divided into professional organisations and trade unions (10), as well as a range of 'cause' groups covering issues such as the environment, human rights, political reform, and identity politics (8);
- 6 protest networks or ad hoc campaigns - some were entirely virtual, being formed online such as Maydayonline and Indymedia UK, others were 'real world' based such as Reclaim the Streets.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection took place over a two year period (February 2001- april 2003) and consisted of the following stages:

1. a longitudinal archive of all websites from organisations' in scope websites was created, websites downloaded over a 18 month period at regular intervals (every three-four months), resulting in 5 datasets.
2. codification and measurement of website functions using a website coding scheme specifically designed for the project performed at each download. (See appendix A).
3. Four surveys of conducted on organisational members' attitudes toward, and usage of, Internet-based forms of participation (single time point). These included: (a) Liberal Democrat members, web-based only, conducted in February 2002; (b) the GPMU, postal and web based, conducted in May 2002; (c) Countryside Alliance, postal survey in December 2003 and web-based in December 2002/Jan 2003; (d) the Labour Party postal and web-based surveys in March/April 2003. Web samples were not random, but self-selected after being publicised by the party; postal survey samples were recruited by the organisations using random sampling techniques, stratified by region (see appendix B). Overall sample sizes for used for the postal questionnaires were around 2000 members. Response rates were difficult to calculate for online surveys given the reliance on self-selection For postal questionnaires response rates for Labour and the CA around 25% but the GPMU survey largely failed as it was sent out as part of the union magazine and elicited only 4.5% response rate.
4. semi-structured face to face interviews with organisational elites to provide more context to the information gathered through the questionnaire. 30 Interviews were conducted with a total of 26 different organisations. (See appendix C)
5. a cross-section of public attitudes toward, and awareness of, Internet-based forms of participation was gathered from face-to-face interviews with a random sample of 1,972 individuals. The questions were developed by the project team and fielded as part of an omnibus run by NOP during the second week in May 2002. (See appendix D).

Methodological Innovation

The most innovative features of the project from a methodological perspective were four-fold: (1) development of a generic coding scheme to content analyse political organisations websites; (2) development of a web-based questionnaire and MYSQL database to examine members' response to online initiatives by the organisation; (3) construction on an online participation scale by identifying a range of new types of behaviour possible through ICTs that could then be compared with offline political activity; and (4) identification and measurement of the impact of 'e-stimuli' from organisations to promote participation among members and the wider public, such as e-mail news bulletins and e-postcards.

Results

The *elite questionnaires and interviews* provide a useful starting point since they provided a basic overview on the initiatives being undertaken by these organisations in regard to new icts, the rationale behind them, and their perceived utility. While some organisations were using computer-mediated communication (cmc) and other forms of the new icts, internally, prior to the arrival of the world wide web, most made their first foray into cyberspace with the development of a public website. For the more formalised groups (parties, pressure groups, and unions) these were established in the mid to late 1990s largely as a result of experimentation by it staff or volunteers. Little strategic thought appears to have gone into their development other than they provided a symbolic commitment to innovation and staying in touch with social trends. As internet use expanded in the population, however, control over websites shifted to campaign or pr divisions, signalling organisations' recognition of the need to adopt a more professional approach to the medium and to better integrate it into their communication strategy. Thus, although developed in a post-hoc fashion, many organisations do now have a more deeply articulated understanding of how these new technologies can benefit them.

In terms of websites – the most public face of the new ICTs revolution - three key functions can be identified: (1) Information dissemination/increasing administrative efficiency – a much greater amount latest news and information can be made available on websites compared with other media, with the costs of distribution being passed to those accessing it; (2) Campaigning/raising awareness– while the audience for the sites may be small, they allow groups to deliver their message direct to the public without editing or censorship by the mainstream media; and (3) Interactive participation - through chat rooms and email lists, organisations can encourage dialogue with and between supporters that can actually allow for greater grass roots input into decision making.

Comparing these attitudes and perceptions with the data supplied from the *content analysis of websites* we find that organisations are translating these goals into reality, at least with regard to more efficient information distribution. Sites were packed full of details about the organisation itself, or ongoing news stories of relevance. Use of the sites for active campaigning and mobilising of supporters were considerably less prominent, however. Making use of the narrow casting possibilities to targeting particular constituencies, such as young people with special pages was very limited. Some of the pressure groups, such as CAFOD, Oxfam or Age Concern, are attempting to recruit e-activists, where visitors sign up to receive regular information bulletins and 'take part in campaigns from the comfort of ones own armchair', as Oxfam puts it (www.oxfam.org.uk). While approximately four fifths of the sites examined in this study at the end of 2002 were expressly seeking to recruit new members via their sites, less than two fifths offered the facility directly. This reticence was particularly notable among 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, however, were seen as one of the main breaks on such initiatives.

Some of the most effective campaigning uses of the technology have come from new virtual protest groups, which, lacking material resources and physical headquarters have focused their efforts on developing initiatives that generate more widespread media mainstream coverage.

PayupTony.com (www.payuptony.com), a website established by two undergraduate students to raise attention to the problem of student debt, is a good example of this. The site offered an e-petition for the abolition of student loans and tuition fees that has been delivered to Downing Street. By mid-2003 they had gathered close to 100,000 signatures. Fax Your MP (www.faxyourmp.com), another site started on a shoestring a group of recent graduates during 2001, offered visitors a facility to contact their MP directly by fax with their opinions and questions. In less than three years the site carried over 50,000 faxes to MPs and served to highlight the difficulties citizens face in easily contacting their representatives, particularly by email. Neither of these campaigns would have survived successfully without the Internet.

In terms of more substantive forms of interactivity, less than a third of the sites offered any kind of discussion forum. Email contact points were quite common but tended to be a generic organisational address, rather than to specific people such as elected representatives or executive committee members. Notably, the Labour Party has run several online Q&A sessions with leading party figures. Age Concern has also held similar sessions on its site with government ministers concerning issues such as pensions policies. The labour and resource intensive nature of such initiatives, however, combined with the relatively small active audience that can be involved, reduce their appeal, particularly for smaller organisations. Open discussion fora also run the risk of descending into abuse and creating a source of negative publicity. In short, therefore, most web based communication tended to be one-way top-down (organisation-to-member) rather than two-way interactive (member-to-member).

Prior to this research, there had been very little information gathered from a bottom up (members/activists) perspective on political ICT usage. Thus to investigate whether members themselves were using the new technology to participate in organisational life and, more importantly, whether they saw it as a positive or negative development we undertook membership surveys with a number of organisations. We sought to examine different types of organisation and also where possible to conduct both postal and online surveys, since the former mode allowed us to reach members who were not yet using the Internet, and assess the relative size of this group and their reasons for not going online. We were successful in running parallel surveys in three cases - the Countryside Alliance (CA), the Labour Party and the GPMU and an online version for the Liberal Democrats. The questionnaires were designed to assess the extent to which the membership used the online services of the organisation, and how far they played a role in mobilising them to join, and/or keeping them involved?

Overall, the findings offered interesting, and largely consistent findings across organisations. The proportions of membership using the Internet were high according the postal surveys – almost 60% of CA members, 65% of Labour members. In terms of take-up of the organisations' ICTs initiatives, websites are among the most popular applications. Four fifths of Liberal Democrats members with Internet access say they have used the website and a quarter visit it every week. Use of the website and email services indicate that both tools can be influential in members' decisions to become more involved in events. For example, among CA members, almost one-third reported that website was an important stimulus in their decision to take part in the march on London during 2002. Email appeared to work in a more in-depth way in that it kept members involved in the more routine activities via through reminders to attend meetings and prompts to volunteer help.

Compared to the average member, those visiting the sites tend to be younger and also more recent recruits to the organisation, albeit with higher incomes than the average member. Thus, on one level the Internet is expanding the reach of organisations into the youth market and prompting an interest in their activities, although as yet websites are not necessarily converting sympathisers into actual members in any great numbers. A stronger trend, however, is that new ICTs are also deepening levels of participation among activists, serving to reinforce members activities offline and extracting more from the already committed. Thus, overall one could say

that the major impact of new ICTs is *to keep* people involved although to a limited extent it is managing *to get* people involved as well.

One final consistent finding was that members who used ICTs generally had broadly positive outlook towards their political use and were interested in developing more interactive forms of communication with their organisation. However, it was notable that many members favoured a more individualised and organisation-to-member form of interactivity (e.g. e-voting on policy or elected positions) rather than member-to-member communication or collective online forms of interactivity. It is possible, therefore, that increasing use of new ICTs within mainstream political organisations will accelerate some pre-existing trends such as the individualisation of participation and more direct forms of communication between organisational leaderships and individual members, rather than collective forms of internal democracy.

In addition to examining the organisations themselves and their members, the project also sought to investigate the impact of new ICTs on levels of mobilisation within the broader public. To do this a series of 14 questions plus demographics were inserted into an NOP omnibus survey that was fielded in May 2002 to 1972 people. The goal of the questions were to identify the extent of online political participation among the British public and compare those rates with offline political behaviour. Who exactly is engaged in online politics and do they all also engage in offline politics? Are the same set of resources important in both types, or does online politics draw on new skills, not incorporated by existing theories of participation? Finally, did organisations seek to exploit the new opportunities the Internet presents for raising awareness through targeted and unsolicited e-mail messages?

These aims required the identification of a range as possible of the new types of political behaviour and e-stimuli possible in the online environment. In all, sixteen new forms of individual political participation using new technology were identified –including visiting a website, signing an online petition, sending an e-postcard, and participating in a chat room or email discussion board. For online stimuli, we asked 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 donations.

The key findings from the survey, on first glance, are hardly a cause for celebration among e-democrats. Online participation attracted only limited numbers. Just 17% of those online reported ever having engaged in any of the specified activities. This was lower than rates offline participation, although only marginally so. In addition, online participators, were, unsurprisingly, drawn largely from the educated upper-middle classes. 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. The figures regarding online stimuli were also underwhelming, with only 15% of those online reporting having received them.

Closer investigation of the findings, however, revealed a more intriguing picture of potential mobilisation. Younger people were significantly more likely to get involved in online politics than offline. 30% of the youngest age group reported that they had engaged in some form of online participation compared with only 11% of those 45 to 54 years. A reversal of the age-based patterns of dominance in offline participation. Further statistical analysis of the relationship between background characteristics and engagement in online politics uncovered an even more interesting story in that once the inequality of access to the technology was taken into account, along with levels of pre-existing interest in politics, participation in online politics depended on

familiarity with the Internet itself, as well as receiving e-stimuli, and being young. These results, therefore, were seen to support the idea that the Internet did offer a chance to widen the pool of participants and bring in previously underrepresented or 'unheard voices'.

A series follow-up questions about the specific political sites that respondents had been visited (political party, pressure group, charity, mainstream or alternative news media site) revealed that in all cases a significant proportion reported they would not have sought information 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 third of those accessing the site said they would not have bothered, had it not been for the net. Even more positively, most people said they became 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. In addition, although the vast majority of net users reported not receiving any e-stimuli, those that had, overall took an interest in what they saw. While just under a third ignored the message, two thirds had some form of more active response, beside expressing annoyance. At minimum this involved nothing more than occasionally reading them, however, one fifth of those in receipt of these stimuli actually said they would either sometimes or always respond. While under utilised, therefore, such results do indicate that the proliferation of such stimuli could further expand the pool of the politically active.

Overall, therefore, in terms of our original questions, we would argue our results do show both a (marginal) expansion or widening and also a deepening or intensification of political participation, as a result of groups using the Internet. While the online political environment is clearly colonised by the already active – both within and outside organisations – it is also managing to attract new people into participation that might otherwise not bother with the offline variety of politics.

Activities

The project has led to the establishment and sustaining of a number of formal and informal networks, and sponsored one conference. The work is linked with a three year German VolksWagen grant-funded project (2002-2005) to examine political and commercial organisations use of the Internet run by Dr. Andrea Rommele (University of Mannheim) and Prof. Michael Woywode (RWTH Aachen, Germany) and has resulted in one consultancy trip by Dr. Gibson, as well as discussion about possible comparative studies. A second network that has been supported and helped disseminate the work of the project has been the EU 5th framework sponsored 'Government and Democracy in the Information Age' (GaDIA) network, in which Dr. Ward has played a pivotal role. Dr Gibson has also acted as director on two ECPR workshops on the themes of ICTs and politics at the University of Grenoble, 2001, 'Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation and Participation Online' and University of Edinburgh, 2003, 'Changing Media Changing Civil Society'.

Outputs

Seven journal articles covering all aspects of the project have been accepted for publication four have already been published (see Regard database entry for full details) and a further three (listed below) are forthcoming this autumn:

"Online Participation and Mobilisation in the UK: Hype, Hope and Reality" *Parliamentary Affairs* 2003, 59 (3).

"Virtually Participating: A Survey of Online Party Members" *Information Polity*, 2003, 7(4): 1-18 .

"The Internet and Political Campaigning: the new medium comes of Age?" *Representation*, 2003, 39 (3): 166-180.

One further paper "Online Campaigning in the UK: The Public Response?" has been produced and sent for review (May 2003) to the *European Journal of Political Research*.

Books and edited volumes

A book is currently being produced to draw together the findings from the project *Difficult Democracy? Political Organisations Participation and the Internet* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2004).

Two edited volumes have also been produced based on background research from the project. The first was special issue of the journal *Party Politics*, on 'Parties and Campaigning on the WWW' 9 (1), 2003, (London: Sage), co-edited with Andrea Roemmele. The second is a forthcoming volume entitled *Electronic Democracy: Mobilisation and Participation Online*, (Routledge: London, 2003) again co-edited with Andrea Rommele.

Reports and conference presentations

A series of reports have been written to disseminate the findings from the membership and public opinion surveys. The membership reports have been made available for organisations' internal use and upon approval will be publicly released before the end of 2003. The public opinion report was publicised in an ESRC press release 'Politicians Must Exploit Internet To Win 'Apathetic' Young Voters' 9/9/02. A further ESRC press release (6/6/03) was sent to a leading political/news website (www.epolitix.com) and was published in full.

Seven conference presentations based on project output have so far been made including: the annual conference of the American Political Science Association 2001, 2002; joint sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, 2001 and 2003; The annual conference of the UK Political Studies Association, 2002; The Political Studies Association Media Specialist Group conference, 2001 and The EURICOM Colloquium, 2002. (See Regard database entry for full details).

Research team members have also accepted or been invited to give papers to forthcoming conference/seminar events including: the APSA annual conference, Philadelphia, September 2003 and an Oxford Internet Institute research workshop, October 2003.

Seminar presentations of the material have been made at GADIA Working Group 2 meeting, University of Tilberg, Netherlands, December 2002 and an Invited presentation was made at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) 'Digital Technology and Democratic Politics' Seminar, June 2001.

A project website (www.ipop.org.uk) was established in November 2001 to disseminate output and provide information and act as a contact point for those interested in the research. By April 2003, the site had received 5000 unique visitors and three of the papers from the project had been downloaded between 1-2000 times. The website has been praised from other academics and practitioners (such as Steven Clift, the originator of the e-democracy newswire service see (www.publicus.net) in the field of e-democracy for its up to date extensive content and links page.

Impacts

There are no direct commercial impacts of the project findings, although the results from the membership surveys have been received with great interest by the relevant organisations. In the case of the Labour Party, the project directors have been asked to make a more formal presentation of results to party officials. A short article was completed for the GPMU member's journal (Direct) reporting the findings of the GPMU survey. The research project, and specifically the findings from the public opinion survey, were highlighted in Parliament by Richard Allen, LD MP, and are recorded in Hansard (6 March, 2003). A publication and launch event bringing together practitioners and academics is planned for the autumn around the theme

of NGOs and online participation. The publication with Professor Stephen Coleman of the Oxford Internet Institute has contributions from a range of organisations including: Age Concern, Countryside Alliance and CAFOD. Finally some of the questionnaires and website coding tools are being used by other researchers. For example, Dr Gerrit Voerman (University of Groningen) and Dr Marcel Boogers (Tilberg University) are planning to use the party membership questionnaires for surveys of Dutch parties to be carried out in the Autumn 2003. As a result, comparative data will then become available.

There has also been Media coverage of the project including:

- *The Guardian Online* 'parties use of the net is dispiriting' 19th June 2001, <http://media.guardian.co.uk/generalelection/story/0,7521,509348,00.html>
- E-politix Forum Brief on 'Electoral Law' 3 June 2003. See <http://www.epolitix.com/default.asp>.
- BBC Scotland interview 'Internet and the General Election' with Dr. Ward, May 2001.
- Voxpolitix, 'Alas Ward and Gibson', September 13th 2002. See <http://www.voxpolitics.com>
- Netpulse 5 (12) June 18th 2001.
- GPMU Direct 'Click Here to Join GPMU?', July-August, 2002, p. 13.

Future Research Priorities

There are a number of areas that could usefully be explored further to expand the picture of online participation we have provided here. Firstly, the results of our study (and indeed, other research in Europe and US) indicate the potential for online amongst young people. A more focussed in depth analysis of young people's use of the technology for political purposes plus the activities of organisations to mobilise younger people could provide greater evidence of Internet's potential. Currently, it is difficult to tell whether there is long term potential in the net as a participatory tool or whether it is simply a replacement technology for more traditional means of participation and once the novelty has worn off its impact will decline.

Secondly, the confines of the Democracy and Participation programme meant that we were limited largely to a UK analysis - although we have, where possible, linked with researchers elsewhere to use some of the data comparatively (see the article in *Party Politics*). There is currently only limited cross-national research in the field of online politics. Consequently, a large cross-national comparison of online participation should be a future priority since this would help reveal: (a) the role of systemic political, technological and social features in shaping the use of technologies for participation e.g. how do political rules, culture and government e-democracy strategies shape participatory usage? (b) the international networking and globalisation of political activism which has received considerable media attention and some argue is one of the most important consequences of the Internet age could also be better explored within a cross-national framework.