Introduction

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Research from the United States and United Kingdom over the past fifteen years shows an increasingly positive relationship between internet use and levels of political engagement. Although the effect might be small at times, more evolutionary than revolutionary, and require certain conditions, it is rarely contested that digital media have an impact on civic and political involvement (Boulianne 2009; Prior 2007; Jensen, Danziger, and Venkatesh 2007; Owen 2006). However, the mechanisms by which internet use makes political engagement more probable remain somewhat elusive. In addition, whether this effect can be observed in other, non Anglo-Saxon political systems is still largely an open question. This question is particularly important given recent events in the Islamic world, where mixed results in citizen-led revolutions have provoked different opinions regarding the consequences of digital media use for democratic politics (Morozov 2011; Zhuo, Wellman, and Yu 2011). To better understand the role of digital media in connecting individuals to the political system, the contributors of this volume examine different aspects of this relationship with a variety of data sources and methodological approaches in a number of diverse contexts.

First, the book analyzes different paths through which digital media are affecting political involvement among citizens. We argue that these paths are both direct and indirect. Digital media have opened new modes of engagement that previously did not exist and that can be used by citizens to express their political views and convey their interests. This book considers a wide variety of different political contexts and political activities available online, and it considers the impact of these activities both on political systems and, most important for our concerns, on citizens. Thus, this volume analyzes online involvement as a direct consequence of digital media use on the way citizens relate to their political environments and the indirect effects that result from internet use via changes in resources, attitudes, and traditional patterns of behavior.

Second, the book studies who is digitally involved in politics. The book explores whether online engagement is associated with an array of different resources and whether those engaged online have different political orientations and constitute differentiated publics. This question moves beyond the reinforcement-versus-mobilization debate that has come to define the field to a great extent. Although this has been largely a useful frame for research questions on digital media, we can progress forward in this debate by considering interactions between different online and offline structural environments that provide mobilizing opportunities. We therefore direct attention to who uses technology and how, taking into consideration differences in the groups of people who are mobilized and are mobilizing online, as well as the types of activities that people perform in the different arenas. Hence, the question is less about whether people become mobilized through internet use and more about who participates online and how people are participating in the different online and offline spaces.

Third, the book analyzes the role of contextual factors in conditioning the relationship between digital media and political engagement. We know from decades of comparative work on political involvement that political participation depends greatly on institutional arrangements, political circumstances, and levels of socioeconomic development. Digital politics should not be different as digital media do not sit apart from political structures and practices. Rather, they innervate and, in part, materially constitute the political structures, institutions, and channels along which participation and mobilization occur (Kallinikos 2004), thereby enabling certain participatory modes and the formation of new political structures (Kriesi 2008; Castells 2009). Comparative work outside of the United States and United Kingdom is scarce. As a result, research in this field is limited in that it has mainly considered a restricted range of institutional arrangements, media systems, and levels of internet diffusion and use. Different contextual aspects, including the characteristics of the political system and its environment, may affect the choice of modes for digital politics engagement, the relevance of digital involvement for specific segments of the population, and the way in which attitudes and resources condition digital politics.

In this introduction we first elaborate a few conceptual clarifications, discuss the literature behind the main research questions of this volume, and finally present the selection of cases and the plan of the book.

Digital Media and the Dimensions of Political Engagement

Before discussing the implications of digital media for political engagement, some conceptual clarification is in order. This discussion intends not to close any conceptual debates but to clarify the meaning of the terms used throughout the book.

Digital media refers to a broad range of digitally networked devices. Digital media are distinguished by the contrast with analog modes of communication.

TABLE I.1. *Dimensions of Political Engagement*

	Offline	Online
Political participation	Representative (e.g., voting, contacting, party activity)	Vertical, unidirectional (e.g., online petition, donation, contact)
	Extrarepresentative (e.g., protest, consumerism)	Horizontal, interactive (e.g., blogging, posting political comments, joining political groups in social networks)
Political information consumption	Exposure to newspapers, television, or radio news offline	Exposure to online sources of information
Political attitudes	Interest in politics, political efficacy, ideological orientations, and so on	

The digitization of information facilitates its compression, manipulation, and transmission (Poster 2001). These characteristics endow users with equal capacities as transmitters and receivers of information (Castells 2009, 22–23). This sufficiency allows for communications to be horizontal and dispersed, thus enabling the formation of flexible and scalable organizational structures (Kallinikos, Aaltonen, and Marton 2010), which are key requisites for functioning networks. The speed of digital communication reduces not only transmission time but also geographic distance (Adams 2009). Digital media therefore include a variety of fixed and mobile devices that can access the internet, where, via a network of networks, digitized information is transmitted instantaneously with global reach (Terranova 2004, 41). The global reach of networks enables each node to engage in "mass-self broadcasting" (Castells 2009, 58), thus representing a qualitative change in the structure of information transmission and circulation in comparison to the broadcast model.

Several chapters in this book take the concept of digital media use as a main independent variable for explaining political engagement. This includes a number of different operationalizations, depending on the specific interests of the chapter and data availability. Indicators used include frequency of internet use; experience in internet use; level of internet skills; and use of specific digital media devices, including mobile devices.

The dependent variables throughout the chapters reference different aspects of political engagement. Without aiming to be exhaustive, we can distinguish at least three dimensions of political involvement: participation, information consumption, and attitudes. Each of the chapters in this book deals with one or several of these dimensions of political engagement. For analytical purposes, the behavioral dimensions of political engagement are classified with respect to the form through which they take shape, either offline or online. Table I.1 presents the three dimensions of engagement with some examples.

As the concept of engagement is already large and encompassing, our definition of political participation is restricted. Here, political participation refers to actions taken by citizens to influence political outcomes (see Teorell, Torcal, and Montero 2007). Traditional studies of political participation emphasized particularly those modes that were related to the institutions of representative democracy, such as voting, joining a party, or contacting a politician (see, e.g., Verba and Nie 1972). Over time, authors have started to pay attention to extrarepresentational forms, such as forms of political protest (e.g., sit-ins, demonstrations, strikes; see Barnes et al. 1979) as well as political consumerism (e.g., boycotts and "buycotts" motivated by political reasons; Micheletti 2003) and the micropolitical processes that influence who has access to and standing in political arenas (Beck 1997; Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones 2007).

Most of these modes of participation can be performed online, as we can contact, petition, donate, or buy through digital media. However, digital media have enabled the creation of new modes of political participation that did not exist before: people could use the web to diffuse their own political views through blogs or comments, upload videos with political content to YouTube, or join political groups in social networks.

The second dimension of political engagement is political information consumption. Given transmission costs, traditional, centrally broadcast media place a significant emphasis on filtering compared to the relatively low entry barriers online, which enable access to a wider range of information sources (both mainstream and alternative; Shirky 2010). It is true that most people who consume online political information do so through mainstream media outlets (Hindman 2009). Online news consumption is, however, different, as readers can directly link to videos and primary sources. Likewise, people can customize their news and exert greater control over information environments online than they can with television or even newspapers (Sunstein 2001; Prior 2007). When official channels of information are suspect or media reporting is highly restricted, online channels are sometimes the only sources of reliable information and, as a result, play a decisive role in civic dynamics.

Although the dimensions presented so far are related to political behavior, the last dimension of political engagement is attitudinal: people may have varying degrees of interest in politics, feelings of political competence, and perceptions regarding the responsiveness of the political regime and authorities. This dimension cannot be crosscut by the offline-online dimension, as attitudes are relatively stable psychological orientations of citizens, not behaviors enacted via different media streams. There is an extensive literature on what a political attitude is and the main categories of political attitudes (Almond and Verba 1963; Martín and van Deth 2007). What is clear is that they are a fundamental component of political engagement with a significant impact on behavior. Thus, they are also considered in several of the chapters of this volume.

The Consequences of Digital Media for Political Engagement

Research on media effects has paid considerable attention to the consequences of media consumption on citizens. Existing research in the United States and the United Kingdom provides two clear departure points in our analysis, thus reflecting behavioral and attitudinal effects associated with digital politics. These relate to the emergence of online involvement and the effect of digital media use on general political engagement. The research presented in this volume is therefore more act and agent centered than media centered.

The Rise of Online Engagement

The most direct consequence of the extension of digital media use for political involvement is the expansion of the repertoire of modes and channels of political participation, communication, and information. The digital interfaces provided by e-mail, blogging platforms, and online social networking sites simplify and facilitate creation and diffusion of political messages as well as political recruitment. Although each of these acts has a history that predates the internet, the structural affordances created by digitally networked media distinguish digital politics in two ways. First, as we noted earlier, digital media enable the formation of ad hoc, flexible networks of political organization and communication outside of traditional civil society networks and media centers. This reduces the impediment of institutional gatekeeping mechanisms. Second, the digital platform is more conducive to a greater range of expression, which can attract different segments of the population and engage them in varied ways. The specific forms of digital politics that emerge at any given time depend greatly on motivations from within concrete political systems.

The relevance of these new opportunities for political engagement is larger in a context of increasing political disaffection that particularly affects representative modes of participation (e.g., voting, party membership) as more political decisions are made outside electorally accountable offices. Hay (2007) notes that although levels of representative or institutionalized participation have been declining significantly, there appears to be some shift in participatory repertoires in the direction of noninstitutionalized or extrarepresentative modes of participation. These noninstitutional modes of politics are highly individualistic and ephemeral (Marien, Hooghe, and Quintelier 2010); less elite driven (Inglehart 1999); derive from lifestyle choices (Beck 1997); and reflect political rather than social capital (Bang and Esmark 2009). Digital networks are highly structurally congruent with these modes of political participation (Bennett 2003; Farthing 2010).

On the one hand, digital media facilitate the development of horizontal political networks. Although the revolution in digital media has provided communication infrastructure that facilitates ad hoc political mobilization (Bimber 2003), "in addition to the 'pull' of opportunities provided by the new media-centered forms of political communication, the 'push' of the declining power of the vote provides an incentive for collective actors to resort to

unconventional forms of participation" (Kriesi 2008, 160). When political authorities and institutions are perceived as unresponsive, nonhierarchical channels, which abound online, may seem more attractive for participation (Little 2008; Bang 2005).

On the other hand, digital media not only allow for grassroots processes but also open, and increasingly require, political institutions to integrate digital media into governance practices and service provision (Anttiroiko 2010). In addition, some politicians and those in government maintain official blogs and Twitter accounts, and use other social media channels to directly reach the public, thereby bypassing media outlets (see Chapter 2). This can provide additional avenues for people to interact with political authorities and agencies in less formalized contexts.

Digital Media Use as a Predictor of Motivations, Attitudes, and Learning

Digital media use, whether for general or for political purposes, can affect the resources and motivations necessary for political engagement. The extent to which people use or are familiar with digital media and their level of internet skills may be among the most important predictors of online political participation, with more explanatory power than motivations such as political interest (Anduiza, Gallego, and Cantijoch 2010; Hoff 2006; van Dijk 2005). Beyond the antecedent condition of physical access, these internet skills reflect cognitive resources, which are fundamental for becoming politically involved online. They may also reflect greater opportunities for receiving mobilization stimuli, for contacting political organizations and diffusing political information, and for escaping governmental control and censorship.

Digital networked communications technologies reduce the costs of acquiring political information, which is a positive motivation for offline political participation (Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Brundidge and Rice 2009). In addition, digital environments can be a source of accidental or by-product learning about politics, which can motivate higher levels of political engagement and participation (Norris 2001, 226; Lupia and Philpot 2005). Digital media use may also have profound consequences on our conception of the political world and our own abilities to deal with its complexity (Crozier 2010; Kallinikos 2004). The creativity permitted by digital media structures may motivate some to participate and other individuals to become more interested in politics. For these reasons digital media are expected to influence political attitudes and offline political participation.

Who Is Engaged through Digital Media?

A third aspect inextricably linked to the previous two is the question of who is engaged through digital media. Scholars have analyzed the extent to which sociodemographic characteristics; resources including education, income, and internet skills; and attitudes including ideological self-placement, interest in politics, and political efficacy affect online political engagement. Who participates online is important for two reasons. First, differences between populations

participating online and offline can give rise to new configurations of political influence. If certain segments of the population participate to a greater extent online and do so effectively, we may find significant differences in the issues raised and in the political forms that emerge online and offline as well as the policies adopted. Second, to the extent that online participation is stratified along the same dimensions as offline participation, this may reinforce previous political inequalities.

The comparison with offline participation is a crucial question in the literature. Scholars have debated at length whether online participation is simply a new mode of engagement used by those already active in politics or whether, conversely, digital media can attract new participants. Debates on this question have shifted somewhat. Earlier work tended to show that those participating online were already politically active offline (Jensen 2006; Best and Krueger 2005; Bimber 2003; Norris 2001; Hill and Hughes 1998).

In general, the evidence for a mobilization effect is based on younger cohorts, a population otherwise more disaffected and disengaged from electoral politics (Jensen, Danziger, and Venkatesh 2007; Owen 2006; Muhlberger 2004). Younger cohorts tend to be more technology savvy, embracing digital media use in multiple domains of life including politics. However, not all online environments provide the same incentives for participation, as web 1.0 environments have more structured architectures of engagement than web 2.0, which characterizes users as co-producers rather than audience members. These varied forms of interactivity may prove more satisfying modes of political activity for certain population segments.

Whether online participation has a mobilizing or a reinforcing effect may not be easily answerable in a general sense for at least three reasons. First, as internet access and use become increasingly common in a political system and the technology becomes more domesticated and integrated into political organizations, workplaces, and homes, the role that it plays may change. Second, internet environments are not uniform. We noted that online engagement is heterogeneous and subject to a changing internet and that there exists some parallel online arenas that might function independently one from another. Therefore, the question is not only who participates but also how they participate – and that changes over time. Third, the larger context of the political system provides differential motivations for participatory forms, as political systems vary in distribution of access to channels of political influence and the role of the internet in structuring the flows of political communications. Hence, in systems in which formalized channels connecting members of a political system with political authorities are closed, or regarded as not reliable, there is often a shift to informal channels (Little 2008).

These three issues suggest that although the reinforcement-mobilization question was a useful orienting framework to deal with changes in and impacts on politics some time ago, that question is showing itself to be somewhat contingent, depending on categories of online participation and on political environments.

The Role of Context in Digital Politics

Individual-level analyses of digital politics, though fundamental, are insufficient: "The disclosure of context-embedded processes through which technology develops or becomes involved in local affairs is indeed essential to the social study of technology" (Kallinikos 2004, 144). Across political systems, different contextual features give rise to differential arrays of opportunity structures, which digital media in turn play a role in constituting. The elucidation of relationships between macrosocial features of political systems and the political use and effects of digital media are far less explored but nevertheless essential for the development of the study of digital politics. To the extent that digital communications expand the number of independent channels for political expression, there are more avenues through which political systems can process inputs. However, a number of contextual elements can shape the range of communications that systems can process and the range of connections possible.

We identify three sets of contextual variables expected to influence the relationship between digital media and political engagement: the digital divide, the media system, and the institutional setting. The relevance of these factors can be inferred from each of the different case studies and comparisons included in this book for the types of digital engagement, the profiles of digitally involved citizens, and the indirect effects of digital media use on political engagement.

First, the digital divide creates differential opportunities for citizens to interact with other individuals, groups, and authorities and political structures (Warschauer 2003; Norris 2001). Internet access varies considerably, with the highest concentration of users in North America and Northern Europe (Internet World Statistics 2009). Given the costs of computer equipment and maintaining an internet connection, in poorer countries with low levels of access, those who are online often represent wealthier, higher educated, and sometimes politically favored segments of the population.

The digital divide is not solely a matter of access; it also refers to the distribution of abilities to use the technology effectively in daily life. Research shows that as strident as the digital divides in access are, the divides in skills, use, domestication (Venkatesh 2008), and motivation (Warschauer 2003, 122) are even greater and less eradicable (van Dijk 2006; Norris 2001). The extent to which digital inclusion exists and the opportunities for internet use vary between countries. This stratification along lines of access, use, and competence therefore affects who becomes involved online.

Second, media systems can also play a significant role in structuring the relative importance and function of digitally mediated participation in a political system. Although media consumption often has a hybrid form in which the transmission and consumption of broadcast media and digital media streams intersect, the media system can shape the motives for digital politics. Beyond that, the integration of media structures into the political process differs greatly across countries (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995). Some media systems are highly regulated by governments and primarily serve a propaganda function, whereas others depend for their legitimacy on independence from the government.

In addition, media systems differ in terms of whether they have a public service charter or are primarily market driven (Currant et al. 2009). Not only is government independence a statutory matter but also media markets may be more or less concentrated and have histories with different levels of partisanship.

In different media systems, digital media can play complementary and countervailing roles. Digital media play a complementary role when they not only serve as another platform for the transmission of media content but also create new ways in which news events are transmitted and experienced. For example, the advent of live blogging, video content live and on demand, and the simultaneous consumption of media streams creates what Chadwick (2007; see also Chapter 2) calls a hybrid media environment. Complementary roles are anticipated more commonly in an open media system. A countervailing posture for digital media is more common when traditional media channels are either closed because of governmental regulation or indirect political pressures from either society or political actors (Smith 2010) or are thought to be a source of misinformation (Castells 2009).

Third, institutions can play a determinative, facilitative, or constraining role in the conduct of digital politics in a political system. Laws regarding political speech are a key dimension. It is clear that in nondemocratic systems, which lack protections for political speech, governments may surveil or censor online speech and prosecute the expression of online opinions that run contrary to official doctrines. This can have significant consequences for the development of civil society as an independent political force. However, even in democratic societies in which freedom of speech is guaranteed by law, government institutions can constrain its practice and exercise. Institutions regulating internet neutrality may legislate on whether service providers can prioritize or prohibit certain forms of internet traffic.

Even institutions not directly tied to the regulation of digital media can affect the role of digital politics in a particular system. Political parties, electoral laws, and even campaign finance provisions can also play a significant role in shaping the opportunities for online politics in different countries (Anstead and Chadwick 2009). Beyond formal institutions, practices of institutional openness and responsiveness can influence the role of parties and other political actors in interactive and broadcast media communication strategies (Witte, Rautenberg, and Auer 2010).

These contextual variables, though not the only system-level variables that influence mobilization, information acquisition, and attitudinal change, condition the role of digital media in a political system and their influence on political engagement. These contextual elements not only function independently but also have interrelated effects; however, it is important to understand variations in individual elements in combination with other aspects of the system from which they derive their particular qualities (Easton 1990, 268). Therefore, the analysis of these contextual variables must be situated in particular cases. For this reason, the chapters in this book proceed in a case-centered rather than a variable-centered manner.

The Choice of Cases and the Plan of the Book

Because the research questions dealt with in this book are closely related, and often each chapter includes several such questions simultaneously, the empirical section of the book is structured according to the choice of cases, starting with the familiar U.S. and U.K. cases and then moving toward increasing levels of heterogeneity by including cases for which empirical material was available. This has involved the analysis of eight individual-level survey data sets, together with data consisting of qualitative and contextual evidence.

The first part of the book opens the volume with research from the United Kingdom and the United States. Because these countries have high levels of economic development, internet diffusion, and long-term democratic consolidation, they provide a unique reference point of cases with highly innovative digital political practices. The second part of the book analyzes Western European countries. This allows us to investigate the extent to which conclusions generated from the U.S. and U.K. cases are generalizeable to other countries with similar levels of political and economic development and the extent to which contextual factors contribute to the understanding of individual-level digital politics. Western European democracies contain great deal of variance in levels of internet diffusion as well as variability in their political and media systems. The third part of the book includes cases outside of the United States and Europe with various levels of economic development (and thus of economic equality and technological development) and different political regimes (corresponding to different levels of protection for fundamental civil and political rights that define both media and institutional contexts). The analysis of these cases allows us to assess the liberalizing role of digital media through their impact on the political engagement of the citizenry and to explore the alternative and diverse political uses of the internet in contrast to the modes most common in representative democracies. We thus move to a most-different-systems research design maximizing variation in the political contexts considered.

Tables I.2 and I.3 present some basic indicators of socioeconomic characteristics, political openness, and internet diffusion for the fifteen countries included in the different case studies of the book. These include population size, degree of urbanization, wealth, equality, human development, literacy, political rights, political institutions, and internet diffusion. These data document the large degree of institutional, socioeconomic, and technological variation that can be found among the cases included in the volume.

Before addressing the empirical analysis, the book begins with a theoretical chapter by Jorba and Bimber that explores key issues regarding citizenship and political engagement across political contexts. Through an extensive exploration of the most recent literature on digital media and political involvement worldwide, the authors acknowledge the convergence of some common interests in the research literature of different countries. This takes them beyond the traditional division in the literature between democratic and nondemocratic regimes, with the former focusing on rates of participation and the latter on surveillance and censorship. The issues they identify go far beyond the