Author: Dr Alex Afouxenidis
Co-Author: Dr Karolos Kavoulakos

Introduction
The basic question of this paper is whether online groups help to foster political engagement and participation among individual citizens, civil society organizations and urban movements in contemporary Greece, especially under the current circumstances of severe economic crisis. In order to fully analyze and comprehend the above question we utilized empirical evidence from a number of research areas which has been already undertaken or are currently running connected to the following groups:

a) the square movement;
b) movements related to preserving public spaces;
c) movements related to special groups of people who are currently out of work and who – due to online types of organization – have generated new forms of contention and political participation.

The focal point of our research, is related mostly to (c) where an internet questionnaire was used in order to assess the overall impact of online/offline political participation and political engagement through the use of social networking groups.

Political Participation, Internet and Social Media

Greece has an estimated number of over 1 million facebook users and a significant number of bloggers. This type of social media and internet penetration served as a likely case to study whether social networking has restructured the face of political participation. The participants in the study, are generally well-educated, young to mid-age and comfortable using the Internet. This increased the probability of finding individuals and/or groups engaged in digital activism, therefore gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the distinction between online and offline political behaviour.

In general, during the first decade of the 21st century, social networks have become integrated into everyday life and practice for millions of people and organizations around the globe. A significant number of theoretical and empirical studies in the

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1 Researcher, National Institute of Social Research, Athens, Greece, www.ekke.gr
2 Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, www.auth.gr
social sciences are starting to form a picture of how this widely spread form of communication affects constitutional democracy and political participation and transforms the rules and methods of political engagement.

An ongoing discussion in current research is concerned with the question of whether the level of political participation in the industrialized or post-industrial world is low. The academic debate is split into two main arguments. Firstly, Putnam (2000) argued that political participation is decreasing as the level of social capital in society decreases and political apathy increases. On the other hand, (Dalton 2008; Dahlgren 2009) it has been suggested that political participation is merely changing, taking new forms, as post-materialist values (Inglehart 1977) become more salient, with social capital being readjusted. Consequently, instead of, for example becoming members of political parties and other such formal organizations, citizens are now engaged outside of the traditional political system (Micheletti 2003).

Since the rapid spread of internet connections in the 1990s, social science has increasingly turned its eyes towards the web as a promise of a more democratic future or, as a process which acts as yet another catalyst in terms of concentrating power into the hands of the few (Hindman 2008). The development of applications often referred to as Web 2.0 and social media over the past ten years, combined with evidence of new forms of rapid networked mobilization (Jenkins 2006), created a renewed interest in the effects of technology on civic activism and overall political participation. There is a sort of historical element throughout various analyses which spans for a period of over 25 years at least: initially, during the 1990s, the web was discussed primarily as a sort of cyberspace. This was also exposed in popular culture via movies such as the Matrix and others, which explored this idea to the fullest and which presented a kind of post-apocalyptic future. During the 2000s the web was described more as a virtual space which produces and regenerates various sorts of virtual societies and communities. It is only recently, that the “net” has begun to be appreciated more closely to what it actually is, namely another realm of everyday reality. Therefore, in our view, although the distinction offline/online may still have some methodological validity, it is becoming progressively defunct as a useful analytical tool. It is more interesting to actually examine the two “realities” in unison rather than in opposition. The evidence of our research, presented here, attempted to look at the use of the net via the lens described above.

A Cautionary Note on Theory & Research Methodology

In our view, advances in computing power increased enormously the possibilities for research within the social sciences fields. It has also helped in gathering and exchanging information quickly across and among different strands of research, thus generating interesting and substantial flows of information and hard data. Additionally, the broad range, scope and volume of data which can be analysed have increased.

However, this does not necessarily mean that theorizing, or exploring new ways to do research, have significantly changed within the social and political sciences. More than often, especially with regards to issues such as the one we are exploring here, substantial problems and issues of the academic research community have remained intact. For example, with regards to, say, political sociology and/or sociology in
general, the fact that the field has already been broken down into smaller, sometimes highly specialized sub-fields, meant that on many occasions research is not directly related to the basic theoretical strands of contemporary sociological thought (Afouzenidis 2012). In other words, fragmenting the field coupled by the ever-increasing need for quick answers and responses to various social issues, has lead to a peculiar sort of methodological standardization: individuals or groups of scientists doing research using, more or less, similar or the same techniques irrespective of what is actually being researched. This type of methodological “impoverishment”, can be partly explained by the loss of vigorous theoretical argumentation.

With regards, to the case of studying the net and/or social media, a number of interesting observations can be made. In general, research remains fragmented and highly empiricist. Research techniques are generally based on gathering huge volumes of data, often with no real consideration on their actual validity, such as what sort of evidence can be usefully utilized, or how and in what ways web data can be correlated to non-web data. Also, comparative elements which are always pertinent in researching society seem to be missing. For example, researchers and academic institutions have done a lot of work on, say, new social media without accounting for possible similarities and/or differences amongst them. Another example is related to the fact that a lot of net research is primarily focused on the individual actor rather than on the possible collective impact social networking may have on individuals. Thus, issues such as diversity, projection of identity and political behavior, are simply reflected by researchers rather than critically interrogated. The opportunity to gather large amounts of data, does not necessarily mean that social scientists understand or are able to explain societal organization and behavior more in depth than previously, especially when adequate theorizing is lacking.

**Political Participation: the Case Study**

The theoretical and methodological considerations stated above, became evident in our research. Underlying the basic research concept was the idea that democratization in the world of inter-connectedness, may reflect new types of political participation compatible with, or even brought about by, technological change.

The current economic and social crisis has brought forward elements connected to the theme of political participation which generally involved the urban youth and some particular collectivities, which played an active part in popular mobilizations since the beginning of the crisis. In general the three major categories we looked at, namely groups attempting to preserve and enhance public spaces, the “square movement” and people out of work, share one basic characteristic that is, they existed “offline” and they mobilized by using online technologies as well as traditional methods. The photos below are examples of widely distributed material during various meetings and gatherings over the past 12 to 24 months.

Nevertheless, the group of unemployed/underemployed university lecturers which became the central focal point of our case study, presented an interesting differentiation to the above: it became organized mainly because of the creation of an internet platform via which news, ideas and methods of mobilization could be rapidly exchanged.
Another example of a widely distributed photograph in the Greek social media: “Greece in crisis” between 2010 and 2011

This picture was also utilized to indicate the global nature of the crisis during 2012
The main narrative behind the study is connected to the fact that because of the severity of the economic crisis the government decided to freeze all newcomer lecturers from entering the university system. These people, spread all over the country, had very little contact with one another and great difficulty in getting together in terms of collectively becoming organized. This study utilized their online platform to ask them a series of questions via an internet questionnaire in order to examine two basic issues: firstly, whether they are active online and, secondly, whether their level of political participation and activity grew via the use of the net. Needless to say that this is a target group oriented study which looks at people who have a rather high educational background and who use the net on a daily basis. In order to correlate our online evidence we also did a series of offline interviews with people who played a major role behind organizing the whole group.

The interviews indicated that individuals who had *no previous experience* of collective action, came together almost by chance, via looking up information over the net on the legal aspects of the government’s actions. In other words, the net was the instrument that brought them together and it was over the net that they exchanged e-mails and personal info. They, very quickly, decided to meet “offline” and organize as a collective group. They subsequently decided to build up a net site which in turn, became the major tool for disseminating info, exchanging ideas and organizing various “offline” events. After the site was created membership grew rapidly demanding their rights from the government in a more substantial and organized manner. Evidence from the questionnaire shows clearly that a huge majority (almost 95%) say that the group would not have existed without the net site. In terms of everyday organizational functioning of the group, almost everything is done “online”: informing the members, exchanging ideas via a blog and a forum and holding virtual meetings to decide on future activity.

The main quantitative findings of the research briefly indicate the following:

- People are in the net every day, mostly for professional reasons. Only 9% used the net for connecting to social media. Therefore, net penetration is high, but runs opposite to social media penetration.
- People use the net mostly as consumers rather than as creators of their own material. For example, 76% stated that they never post messages relating to political content.
- People seem to participate more in activities such as online petition signing.
- A significant number of people (42%) became informed about the creation of the group via the net.
- Almost 87% said that they remain “ordinary members” of the group.
- About 74% stated that they never belonged to any political party or such similar organization.
- About 46% said that they never belonged to any other sort of collective organization, such as an environmental or political movement, etc.
- Almost 70% said that they were never members of any civil society organizations, ngo’s, etc.
The above indicate that in general, people have had a relatively low level of “offline” political participation and activity which did not substantially improve because of net use. However an interesting point arose when we asked whether their participation in the group increased the time they spend on the net and by default whether it has improved their knowledge on political and current affairs. About 22% responded positively to the first question, and interestingly enough, almost 47% said that they feel more informed via their participation in the group.

A number of respondents were positive when prompted to indicate whether they feel more positively inclined to participate in public activities which have a political context. These are people who used to be active in the past and who became interested in political participation again due to the existence of the group’s site. Their main characteristics are as follows:

- People who post political messages over the net and social media.
- People who participate in mailing lists.
- People who write in forums.
- People who regularly visit web pages of various social movements.

Therefore, in general, people who had experience in collective action and/or direct political participation in the past and who for various reasons became inactive, became interested again via the use of the group’s net site.

Conclusions

Evidence is unclear on whether the use of the net and/or social media with respect to political participation actually enhances activity and generates new forms of democratic engagement. While it is highly noteworthy that online participation was the major cause for the generation of an offline collective organizational form, evidence also points to the fact that use of the net is ephemeral and does not alter significantly the basic “political discourse” of individuals. Although, for example, it may slightly increase political knowledge, this does not mean increased levels of participation which strongly correlate to net use. Social movements and active individuals existed before the era of mass communication just as they do today. What precisely it means to be politically active on or off the net, and whether democratic processes are enhanced because of the net, remain unclear questions for further research.
Bibliography


