

Civic Engagement and the Media: Past and Present; Harnessing the Power of the Internet to Spur Social Change

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The 21st century has seen Internet use enter the mainstream, a godsend for instant communication, but what this suggests for civic engagement is less clear. This thesis first, and briefly, examines the historically beneficial relationship that exists between civic engagement and social media, focusing on United States 20th century paradigms. Thereafter, the paper appraises this relationship at present, and why the Internet, for all its technological virtues, may be underused and overvalued in terms of civic engagement. Beginning in the 1990s, the Internet began spinning into a more and more complex World Wide Web. One decade into the 21st century, it is a ubiquitous and increasingly affordable view beyond any one user's horizon. Unlike other communication innovations, however, the Internet is amorphous and less understood. Information online is immortal, critics unforgiving, personal data uninsured, and reputations quickly made and lost. As a fulcrum for the wannabes, a platform for the demagogues and a land of plenty for the entrepreneurial, the Internet's power is overwhelming and has raised a multitude of questions.

The advent of the Internet is a case of mixed meanings for social change, though it very well may be the only solution to problems it has created. The latter half of the paper details an effort to create and manage, from inception to end, a website that encourages and rewards civic engagement. Data derived from this experience, and the venture's outcome itself, are used to draw conclusions and issue recommendations about what incentive systems are web-comparable and to deconstruct the Internet's user base. Empirically, the paper seeks to describe the ideal and as of yet uncreated website and users that, in mass pairing, offer strong possibility of harnessing the civic engagement potential of the Internet to reign in the immense social challenges of today.