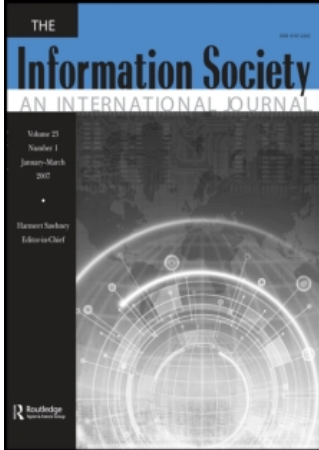


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Michael J. Jensen^a; James N. Danziger^a; Alladi Venkatesh^a
^a CRITO (Center for Research on Information Technology and Organizations),
University of California, Irvine, California, USA

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Civil Society and Cyber Society: The Role of the Internet in Community Associations and Democratic Politics

Michael J. Jensen, James N. Danziger, and Alladi Venkatesh

CRITO (Center for Research on Information Technology and Organizations), University of California, Irvine, California, USA

A healthy civil society has long been held as vital to a healthy democracy and there is interest in whether the Internet affects this linkage. This paper explores the relationships between offline and online modes of associational life and also analyzes offline and online interactions with local governments in the US context. Based on our empirical analyses of 1,203 respondents, we show that online participation is not simply an extension of offline participation, but can be distinguished in important ways. First, we find that political and community-oriented engagements cluster separately from more private-regarding engagements. Second, participants of online democratic engagement are not characterized by the SES markers associated with offline democratic engagement who are older, have higher incomes, and have lived in the community longer. Finally, we find significant links between democratic engagement with the political system and involvement with political associations (but not social and community-oriented associations).

Keywords civil society, democracy, digital divide, e-democracy, Internet, local government, political participation

It is generally agreed that Internet adoption and diffusion are occurring more rapidly than for almost any other technology in history, and the Internet is becoming

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Address correspondence to Alladi Venkatesh, CRITO, 3200 Berkeley Place, University of California, Irvine CA 92697, USA. E-mail: avenkate@uci.edu

indispensable for many sectors of the population (ITU, 2002; Hoffman et al., 2004). Among Americans online, more than 80% say the Internet plays a vital role in their daily routines (Fallows, 2004). Given these trends, social scientists have begun exploring the political and social implications of Internet use (e.g., Hampton, 2003; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Bimber, 2003; Norris, 2001; Davis, 1999; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). Of particular interest are comparisons between offline and online modes of political engagement and whether Internet users participate in the political system differently from those offline. This article offers a theoretically-based empirical exploration of these issues.

A central issue posed by the literature is whether the Internet will support offline associations and community life (Culnan, 2005; Hampton, 2003; Venkatesh, 2003; Boase et al., 2006). This is significant in light of concerns raised by a wide range of scholars who herald civil society as a necessary element in a functioning democracy and economy (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Alesinia & Wacziarg 2000). These scholars and others characterize civil society associations as a site for organizing and a conduit for communication (Mueller et al., 2004; Selian, 2004). Civil society has occupied a central place in American studies of democracy and politics since the publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2000 [1835/1840]), widely considered to be one of the most perceptive studies of political life in America (Wolin, 2001). In his work, Tocqueville detailed the crucial role played by civil society associations in sustaining democracy.

More recently, questions have been raised concerning the decline of civil society in America (Putnam, 1995a, 2000, 2002). Relying on numerous measures of social and political activities, Robert Putnam finds an across-the-board decline in participation in civil society organizations during the latter half of the twentieth century. He charts a decline in voting, working on political campaigns,

attendance at political events, and petition signing, all of which seem to correlate in some measure with declines in club meeting attendance, formal club membership, church attendance, and membership in professional associations and unions (Putnam, 2000). Putnam identifies television as the most likely and significant cause of the decline in associational membership, and he observes that both television viewing and disengagement from politics and civil society are particularly concentrated in younger cohorts (Putnam, 1995b, 2000). He remains ambivalent about the prospects that the Internet might revive associational life (Putnam, 2000). While privileging face-to-face interactions, Putnam expresses some optimism that the Internet might support and revitalize associational life in communities rather than erode it.

This article provides an empirical investigation of the relationship between offline and online engagements with the community and with local governments in the American context. We explore these engagements in terms of *practices*—that is, constellations of related activities. Central to the literature on civil society and democracy is the relationship between citizen engagement with associations and with government. Our study addresses this topic by posing the following research question:

- Are there distinctions between online and offline modes of democratic engagement with the political system? In other words, are there differences in the civil and cyber society ties that predict online and offline democratic participation? Related to this, do socioeconomic variables help account for similarities and differences in online and offline participation?

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There has been considerable debate over whether the Internet supports or hampers community development. Mark Poster (2001) and Sherry Turkle (1995) are among those who suggest that the Internet constitutes a new medium that enables the development of new forms of community that are not subject to the constraints of traditional, offline community life. However, other studies suggest that Internet use tends to leave people more isolated from offline social contacts and increases feelings of social isolation (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie et al., 2002; Dreyfus, 2001). And a third group of researchers argues that both of the lines of research just described err in that they are “biased” because they “privilege the Internet as a social system removed from the other ways people communicate” (Hampton, 2003, p. 418). Thus, Keith Hampton contends that

Online relationships are treated as entities in themselves, isolated from existing social networks and existing means of communication. Ignoring the crosscutting nature of com-

munity has made it impossible to determine if community involvement has decreased as a result of ICTs, if it has shifted to a new medium, or if computer-mediated communication (CMC) facilitates community on- and offline. (Hampton, 2003, p. 418)

He concludes his own study of a wired community by noting that we should consider online modes of interaction not in terms of a distinct set of social practices, but, rather, integrated into other modes of community life. Hence Hampton’s findings suggest that engagement in similar offline and online activities should be closely related.

In exploring these themes, our research intersects literature on the relationship between civil society and democracy, Internet use, and political participation. We begin by expanding on Tocqueville’s analysis through a general explication of the role civil society plays in linking the political community with political authorities and we then discuss these themes in relation to the Internet.

Civil Society Issues

While distinguishing civil associations from political associations, Tocqueville took civil associations including the family to play a crucial role in the cultivation of democratic habits fostering participation in political society.¹ Henrik Bang (2003) highlights the communicative element in this process, something less pronounced in Tocqueville’s writings. Associations within the local community become places where people discuss and formulate opinions about political matters and they also serve as vehicles through which people voice their views to local political authorities. The otherwise hierarchical relationship between the political community and the government is somewhat flattened, governance becomes a more distinctly communicative activity, and politics is said to be democratic to the extent that it is dialogical (Bang, 2003). Hence governance does not simply reflect the political rationalities of the authorities and regime but also the dialogue—as it exists in greater or lesser degrees—between authorities and members of the political community.

Much of the current empirical work on the relationship between civil society and democracy is predicated on an institutionalized conception of democracy (e.g., Tarrow, 1996; Newton & Norris, 2000). Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) has done some of the most extensive, methodologically rigorous, and well-known empirical work on the relationship between civil society and democracy. His principal aim is to explain how civil society “makes democracy work.” Drawing on a wide variety of data sources from the United States and Italy, Putnam has demonstrated a positive relationship between aggregate levels of community engagement in a region and the responsiveness and effectiveness of government institutions (Putnam, 1993, 2000).

Although Putnam draws extensively on Tocqueville to ground his work theoretically, Putnam's view differs from Tocqueville's in two ways that are significant for our study.² First, Putnam's view of the relationship between democracy and associational life does not differentiate between *types* of community engagements. Tocqueville thinks the type of community interaction matters, because only those interactions that bring a political, and therefore public, spiritedness into community life deepen democracy (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 642–643). Hence engagements with groups that are more directed at the private interests of the individual, without regard for community (and therefore broader political) interests, do not facilitate a closer connection between the government and the political community. Thus our study differentiates the types of interactions with both civil society and cyber society in order to investigate the relationships between particular types of associations separately.

Second, in contrast to Putnam's focus on institutional outputs, our study focuses on the practices of both offline and online political participation in relation to civil society and cyber society. The analytic advantage of our approach is the ability to specify the means by which associational engagement facilitates political engagement and investigate which types of engagements matter—offline and online. If declining community involvement is detrimental to democracy, we need to know what types of community life in civil society really matter and what role cyber society might play in building community life.

From the discussion just presented, and based on Banfield and Wilson's (1963) dichotomy, we identify associations primarily serving two types of interests, *public-regarding* interests and *private-regarding* interests. For our study, public-regarding interests include *political associations* and *community associations* whereas private-regarding interests include *social associations*. *Political associations* are those directed primarily, if not exclusively, at the pursuit of political goals. *Community associations* are groups formed without a direct relationship to the pursuit of political goals, but draw in the political habits of members and are directed at community interests rather than private interests. Finally, *social associations* are primarily directed at the pursuit of private interests. These conceptual distinctions allow us to explore relationships between different types of associations in relation to each other and between associational life and political participation.

Cyber Society and the Internet

In Howard Rheingold's investigation of the WELL in 1993, he popularized the term "virtual community," which he defined as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on discussions long enough,

with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). In this article, we use a more general concept we call "cyber society" to denote interactions with a host of online groups that are characterized by varying degrees of anonymity and affective attachment, including everyday online surfing. Through these online engagements with a variety of different groups, "one invents oneself and one knows that others invent themselves," and one comes to know and relate to "the others through those inventions" (Poster, 2001). These practices are particularly important in the case of political participation. Such interactions are always socially embedded; the Internet constitutes a medium that seems to present different dynamics, opportunities, and constraints for interaction from those one encounters offline. In this way, we seek to explore the relationship between everyday online interactions with different types of groups and the relationship between such practices and political participation—both offline and online. Thus the question regarding whether and the extent to which the Internet can develop different kinds of social ties speak directly to the issues raised by Tocqueville (2000) and Putnam (1995a, 2000).

The various issues discussed here are particularly important for democratic practice if the Internet is a medium that can mobilize additional segments of the political community who do not participate offline. There is some debate regarding the implications of the Internet for political participation. First, some "cyber-optimists" suggest that the Internet will help mobilize groups of people who otherwise are not politically engaged (Rheingold, 1993; Sclove, 1995; Budge, 1996). Michel de Certeau refers to the creation of "small experimental groups . . . [enabling] a sort of power of local consciousness-raising for younger generations (whose limited material means and still uncertain status would otherwise hold them in the networks of their superiors)" (de Certeau, 1997, p. 110–111). Subsequent empirical work has found some support for this speculation. For example, in Peter Muhlberger's (2004) exploration of online political discussion, he finds, among other things, that online political discussions tend to draw in a wider variety of demographic groups, thus helping to mitigate slightly the socioeconomic status (SES) stratification characteristic of offline participation.

In contrast, others argue that the Internet will either have marginally beneficial or even negative consequences for democracy. A number of scholars argue that the Internet tends to reinforce the same structures that otherwise constitute "determinants" of political practices offline (Bimber, 1998; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Davis, 1999), or that Internet use will only help facilitate political mobilization to a limited extent (Bimber, 2003).

One source of this pessimism is the argument that the digital divide will generally reinforce existing disparities

in political participation that tend to favor those with higher SES (Warschauer, 2003). Higher SES has long been the most consistent and one of the strongest sets of structural variables that predict levels of political participation. One of the more salient accounts of this is termed the “resource model” (Verba et al., 1995).³ The resource model contends that those with higher income, educational, and occupational levels, as well as more years lived in the community, have more of the resources and capabilities that are functionally necessary for higher local participation. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, p. 3) note that, in addition to having motivation, “those who wish to take part must also have the resources that provide the wherewithal to participate.”

The concern about the digital divide is that it may magnify political inequalities. While aspects of the digital divide may be narrowing as the costs of the technology decline, this divide still mirrors the SES stratification in political participation in the era of high speed broadband Internet access. For some, the digital divide is an impossible game of catch-up and “the gap seems to widen” (Parayil, 2005; p. 42). This observation more broadly builds on earlier studies concluding that those (elites) with substantial political resources will be able to control and shape the manner in which information and communications technologies mobilize political involvement (Danziger et al., 1982).

DATA AND METHODS

Data

The data for this study were gathered from a telephone survey of 1203 respondents using the random digit dialing (RDD) method. The sample was drawn from 12 geographically diverse metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). From each MSA, we selected a probability sample of 100 respondents, with an overall response rate of 44.3%. These areas were selected primarily on the basis of having a relatively high level of broadband Internet access and use in the home. If Internet use is impacting political practices in American communities, these are the areas where we would first expect to see it. While these areas tend to include wealthier communities (25% reporting household annual income of \$100K+, 15% in \$75–100K range, and 21% in \$50K–75K range), there is some diversity in income distribution, with 30% of our sample reporting yearly household incomes of \$50,000 or less and more than 12% of our sample earning \$30,000 or less. Furthermore, there is diversity in the types of communities in our survey: They include rural areas, small towns, suburbs, and cities. The sample is 85.0% Caucasian, 4.8% African American, 4.6% Asian American, and 3.5% Hispanic; the rest classified themselves “other” or declined to state an ethnicity.

A full listing of the MSAs and description of the sample selection process are given in Appendix 1.

We surveyed respondents regarding a variety of household and individual practices with respect to their use of information technology in the household and their interactions with various community groups. These data provide a reasonable basis for our empirical exploration of online and offline patterns of engagement with community life and with the political system.

Measures

We refer to the research question formulated at the beginning of the article and investigate it empirically using the following measures. Question wordings can be found in Appendix 2.

Online Contacts. This was measured in terms of the frequency (often, sometimes, hardly ever, never) with which respondents used the Internet for contacting or obtaining information from each of four types of associational groups: online community group, online hobby group, online political group, and online religious group. These items were based on categories of offline associational interaction discussed in Putnam (2000).

Reliance on Online News. We asked respondents which source they primarily rely on for news about local politics and community affairs. This was measured as a dichotomous variable (1 = Internet, 0 = another source).

Offline Contacts. We operationalized community contacts through the respondents’ reports on self- and household engagement in various community activities in the preceding year. These were based on categories of community engagement explored by Putnam (2000) and included four types of measures (yes/no): member of an offline club, attended a neighborhood event, planned a neighborhood event, and held office in a local club.

Offline Transaction. We also included as an independent variable a key form of offline engagement with the local political system (taken from the work of Verba, et al., 1995) where the respondent was a consumer of government services, rather than an active participant in the democratic process. Thus the measure was simply called *offline transaction* and was based on whether the respondent had visited a city office to complete a transaction such as paying a bill or taxes.

Respondent Characteristics. We included a series of variables concerning respondent demographic characteristics and SES levels: years lived in community (six categories: <1 to 16+ years), respondent age (five categories: 18 to 65+), respondent education (10 categories: eighth grade or less to master’s+), household income (six categories: \$15K or less to \$100K+), race (white = 1, non-white = 0), and gender (female = 1, male = 0).

Dependent Variables. We measured *online democratic engagement*, one of our two dependent variables, in terms of three modes of engagement (derived from the work of Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995; Muhlberger 2004):

- Respondent or a household member contacted a public official in the local government online.
- Respondent or a household member obtained information about past/upcoming public meetings online.
- Respondent participated in an online discussion about local politics.

Each item was dichotomous (yes = 1 or no = 0). Based on these three responses, we constructed an additive scale ranging from 0 to 3, measuring how many different types of online democratic engagement had occurred during the preceding year.

Offline democratic engagement. A second dependent variable was also assessed by constructing an additive scale (ranging from 0 to 2), based on two measures of offline activities engaged in during the preceding year. These were also derived from research by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995):

- Respondent or a household member attended a local public meeting.
- Respondent or a household member contacted a local public official on the telephone, in person, or in writing.

Methods

Our data analysis is primarily grounded in two techniques. First, to analyze the relationships between offline and online engagement with political, community-oriented, and social organizations, we employ a multidimensional scaling (MDS) technique. Second, in order to explore relationships between democratic political engagement and both civil society and cyber society, we employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models.

We use the MDS technique to provide broad outlines of the structure of associational interactions across civil society and cyber society. MDS is appropriate for the analysis of similarities between different entities within a social system, including analyses of equivalence between different types of phenomena and for exploring the existence and cohesiveness of subsystems (Cauce & Srebnik, 1990; Brieger et al., 1975; Wasserman & Faust, 1997). MDS has been used by sociologists to systematically represent social fields and identify patterns of interactions (Ennis, 1992; Yiannakis & Gibson, 1992). In contrast to binary measures of association, MDS illuminates congeries of related activities—which we have termed *cohesive practices* within the social system. The more consistent the

response patterns are between pairs of items, the more closely the individual items are mapped.⁴ In contrast to correlation analyses, MDS enables us to more effectively identify substantive distinctions between entities within a field of activities that might be otherwise statistically associated. For instance, biologists use MDS as a way to categorize and distinguish genetic structures and variation within a species or between species that are otherwise significantly correlated (Lessa, 1990).⁵ The relative values graphically displayed by the MDS solution are useful because they allow us to visualize and distinguish meaningful constellations of common types of engagements, rendering them more interpretable.⁶

The OLS regression technique is our primary means of analyzing online and offline democratic participation. By using separate models for offline and online participation, this technique enables us to establish which engagements in community life and which respondent characteristics are predictors of each mode of political engagement.

RESULTS

Frequency data on the community interaction variables are displayed in Figure 1. In terms of online activities, the most frequently reported activity is contacting a hobby or interest group (57%), followed by contacting a community group (35%). The other two online activities, contacting a political group (28%) and contacting a religious group (23%), are both lower in frequency but are still at notable levels. Among the offline activities, membership in an organization (62%) has the highest proportion of

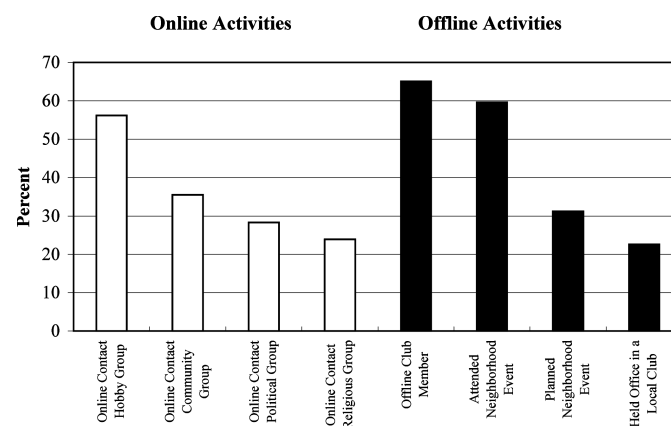


FIG. 1. Percent active in offline and online community engagement. Note: For each of the offline activities, this percentage refers to the percentage of households replying affirmatively that they engaged in the particular activity, while each of the online activities refers to the percentage of respondents indicating that they “often” or “sometimes” have contacted a particular type of group online.

TABLE 1
A taxonomy of offline and online activities

Public-regarding		
Political	Community-oriented	Private-regarding, social
Online political group contact	Online community group contact	Attend a neighborhood event
Planned an event offline	Online religious group contact	Local club member
Held office in an offline organization		Online hobby group contact

participants, followed by attending a neighborhood event (60%), planning a neighborhood event (31%), and holding an office in a local organization (22%). These data indicate a great deal of variation among citizens across both offline and online community interactions.

Outlining Associational Engagement

Given our discussion of Tocqueville, we anticipate that there will be a separation between people's involvement in *politically-oriented* and *community-oriented* activities (public-regarding) and in *socially oriented* activities (private-regarding) that cater to more private interests of individuals and households. Thus we developed a taxonomy (Table 1) that reflects these three categories of participation. Politically- and community-oriented activities are distinguished from socially-oriented activities by the fact that the former modes are directed at public-regarding goals while the latter mode is directed more at private-regarding goals (recall the earlier reference to Banfield & Wilson, 1963). For instance, holding office in an organization requires an individual to be concerned with the welfare of the members of the organization, whereas only being a member locates an actor in a more individual and consumptive role. Thus attendance at a community event, membership in a local club, and affiliation with an online hobby group are classified as social rather than community-oriented roles.

We utilized a multidimensional scaling (MDS) technique to assess these distinctions empirically. To assist in interpreting the clusters produced by the MDS analysis, we initially examined the binary (Tau beta) correlations between the various online and offline community activities. These results are reported in Appendix 3. The matrix indicates that all these activities are correlated and that the highest correlations are between pairs of online activities and pairs of offline activities. It is notable that the simple correlations between each pair of online activities and each pair of offline activities have higher Tau beta values than every pairing of an online activity and an offline activity, with only one exception. That exception is that the correlation between online community group activity and offline club membership is slightly higher than sev-

eral of the pairs of offline activities and one pair of online activities.

However, these positive correlations indicate that the individual relationships are subject to colinearity problems that might obscure interesting underlying structure within the array of human activities we are examining.⁷ Hence our analysis centers on MDS as a way to explore whether there are patterns of political and social practices. Figure 2 displays our two-dimensional solution, selected because it yielded the greatest improvement in accounting for the variance in the data (nearly 97% of the variance) and reduction in model stress.⁸ The two dimensions yield four quadrants, with the eight activities located in four clusters. Empirically, these eight activities line up along two dimensions in a manner consistent with the distinctions posited in our taxonomy. Thus we label the two dimensions of engagement as *Online—Offline* and *Political/Community (Public)—Social (Private)*.

Given the MDS technique, the more the activities are jointly engaged in, the closer they map in Figure 2. Conversely, activities that are further apart have a lower joint occurrence. The analysis indicates that the elements in

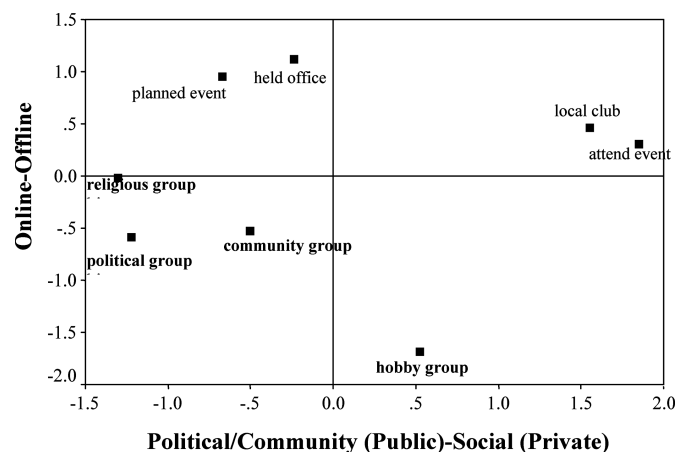


FIG. 2. Spatial relationships between modes of community engagement: multidimensional scaling result. Stress = .071, $R^2 = .966$. Bold items are online activities; non-bold items are offline activities.

each cluster of practice are more strongly associated with each other than with the elements in another cluster. The top left quadrant (Quadrant 1) contains the *offline political/community-oriented engagements* in civil society (planning a neighborhood event, holding office in a local club). The top right quadrant (Quadrant 2) includes the *offline social activities* (local club member, attending a neighborhood event). The lower left quadrant (Quadrant 3) contains the *political/community-oriented interactions* in cyber society (with an online political group, religious group, or community group). The lower right quadrant (Quadrant 4) contains the single *online social engagement* (an online hobby group).

As the results show, we find support for a distinction between civil society and cyber society. When considering political/community-oriented groups, we find distinct clusters of online activities (political group, religious group, and community group—Quadrant 3) and clusters of offline activities (planned a neighborhood event and held office in a local club or organization—Quadrant 1).

Second, among offline activities, we find that the offline political/community-oriented activities (Quadrant 1) cluster far apart from the offline social activities (Quadrant 2). Likewise, among online activities, we find that interaction with hobby groups, the most social online activity (Quadrant 4), is distinct from the online political/community-oriented activities (Quadrant 3—political groups, religious groups, and community groups).

Third, we find separation between online hobby groups (Quadrant 4) and their offline social counterparts (local club membership and attendance at a neighborhood event—Quadrant 2).

Finally, since the dimensions of the MDS results on each axis (−1.5 to 2.0 and 1.5 to −2.0) are equal in spatial terms, we can conclude that the online–offline and social–political/community dimensions are of relatively equal salience in accounting for variation in the data.

Associational Engagement and Engagement with the Political System

Now we turn to the remaining part of the research question regarding the associational life and offline and online modes of participation with the political system.

A common thread in theories of civil society is the belief that there is a positive relationship between interactions with civil society and engagements with the political system. However, as we indicated earlier, there is some disagreement within this literature regarding which types of group associations are linked with political engagement. Based on Tocqueville's observations, we expect that online engagement with the political system will be associated with interaction with political/community-oriented groups, but not with such social engagements as hobby groups, club membership, and attending a neighborhood event.⁹ Moreover, we also noted earlier that there is some debate in the literature as to whether SES considerations and community ties will be more or less salient offline than online.

In this subsection, we offer an empirical exploration of these issues. First, we report the levels of offline and online political participation in Table 2 in terms of the number of participatory activities. The results are based on a valid sample of 1003 respondents (out of a total study sample of 1203) for which data were available. These data indicate that 26.5% report democratic participation online and 45.4% report offline participation. While 7% of the sample report engaging in two online participatory activities and 2% in three activities, 16% report engaging in two offline participatory activities and none in three offline activities. This is an important (although small) difference between online and offline participation. More broadly, about 43% indicate that they have visited a local government web site, most for purposes other than democratic participation (these data are not reported in Table 2).

Second, our research question asks whether engagement with groups in general or only with political groups is related to political participation and whether there are socioeconomic differences between offline and online participation. To further explore this question, we examine predictors of online and offline democratic political engagement, using an OLS regression. The results are displayed in Table 3.

Broadly speaking, in terms of the interactions with political/community-oriented groups versus social groups, these data support the claim that, for the most part, only *political* activities within civil society and cyber society are significantly related to democratic engagement with the

TABLE 2
The levels of online and offline democratic engagement

	Number of participatory activities				Mean	SD	n
	0 (Valid %)	1 (Valid %)	2 (Valid %)	3 (Valid %)			
Online participation	737 (73.5%)	175 (17.4%)	71 (7.1%)	20 (2.0%)	0.38	0.704	1003
Offline participation	548 (54.6%)	295 (29.4%)	160 (16.0%)	—	0.61	0.746	1003

TABLE 3
Regression analyses for predicting online and offline democratic engagement with the political community

Variable	Online engagement		Offline engagement	
	B (SE)	Std. B	B (SE)	Std. B
Constant	-.375* (.133)		-.558*** (.140)	
Online community group	.040 (.024)	.058	.034 (.026)	.047
Online hobby group	.030 (.020)	.049	-.014 (.022)	-.021
Online political group	.190*** (.023)	.264	.136*** (.025)	.178
Online religious group	.007 (.022)	.009	.001 (.023)	.002
Offline club member	.102* (.049)	.071	.089 (.052)	.059
Attend neighborhood event	.037 (.047)	.025	.090 (.049)	.058
Planned neighborhood event	.157** (.054)	.092	.124* (.057)	.068
Held office in local club	.109* (.051)	.071	.128** (.054)	.079
News from Internet (dummy)	.106 (.057)	.056	-.010 (.060)	-.005
Offline transaction	.120** (.041)	.085	.277*** (.044)	.185
Years lived in community	-.001 (.002)	-.018	.005* (.002)	.079
Respondent age	.001 (.002)	.016	.006*** (.002)	.111
Respondent education	.006 (.011)	.017	.006 (.011)	.017
Household income	.000 (.015)	.000	.063*** (.016)	.121
Race (white)	-.027 (.059)	-.014	-.054 (.062)	-.026
Respondent gender	-.020 (.041)	-.014	-.005 (.043)	-.003

Note. OLS regression: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Online engagement: $n = 1003$, $r = .442$, $r^2 = .195$, SE of estimate = .637. Offline engagement: $n = 1003$, $r = .454$, $r^2 = .206$, SE of estimate = .670.

political system. For both *online* and *offline* democratic engagement, these political/community activities include contact with online political groups, planning a neighborhood event, and completing a transaction with one's local government. In addition to these three, holding office in a local organization is also significantly related to offline political engagement. In contrast, these data also suggest the relative absence of ties between democratic political engagement with the political system and the more social modes of activity in civil society and cyber society. In particular, interactions with online hobby groups, online religious groups, and attendance at neighborhood events do not predict democratic political engagement with the political system, whether offline or online. Membership in an offline club is weakly related to online participation but not to offline participation.

Comparing the two models in Table 3, we also find support for making additional distinction between persons who participate online and those who participate offline. While every variable that is a significant predictor of online participation is also a predictor of offline participation, some variables are associated only with offline participation and not with online participation. In particular, the key demographic categories of greater household income, higher respondent age, and more years lived in community all predict higher offline democratic participation in the local political community. Conversely, income, age

and length of community membership have no bearing on online participation.

Thus the results presented in Table 3 regarding offline political participation are generally consistent in direction with previous work which finds that SES variables play a leading role in predicting political participation (Verba et al., 1978, 1995; Brady et al., 1995). Our analysis does not indicate a significant coefficient between offline political participation and gender, ethnicity or education level. Some of these null findings might be, in part, attributable to the strong coefficient for household income or might be due to the fact that in our sample, 60% of the respondents have at least a college education.

In contrast, our results reveal that none of the various status indicators are significant when analyzing Internet-mediated democratic political engagement. That is, age, household income, and years lived in the community, as well as education, race, and gender, are not significant in our regression analysis of online participation. This runs counter to expectations, given the salience of SES as a predictor of offline political participation, a pattern generally confirmed in our data.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The central issue raised by this article is: Does the Internet implicate the relationship between civil society and cyber

society and online and offline democratic interactions with the political system? Our analysis shows that the Internet-mediated activities are not simply an extension of offline political practices, but appear to be a distinct, although socially embedded, medium in which political behavior takes place. Furthermore, these data suggest that political engagements in the community are associated with contacting the regime, political information-seeking, and online political communications, but that social engagements are not. And one of the most important conclusions from our analysis is that there is a greater democratization of the political process online compared to offline since none of the SES variables seem to constrain the former. Our findings can be elaborated in terms of four broad points.

First, we find that *online practices of community involvement are empirically distinguishable from offline practices*. That is, while there is a positive correlation between involvement in any type of community activity, offline or online, and involvement in any other community activity, online community interactions are more strongly associated with similar online community interactions than with their offline counterparts. Those who are engaged with such online associational contexts as hobby, political, and religious web sites tend to come from households that are far more likely to engage in other forms of online engagements than in such modes of offline associational life in the community as attending and planning neighborhood events and holding office in a club. Hence it seems possible to distinguish cyber society and to understand the role of the Internet in social relationships as something more than that it is merely “integrated into [the] maintenance” of offline relationships (Hampton, 2003, p. 427).

Second, we identify an additional dimension among the forms of online and offline associational life in our analysis. In particular, *political/community-oriented associational practices cluster separately from the social modes of association*. That is, public-regarding forms of associational life, such as interacting with an online political group or holding office in an offline organization, are empirically differentiated from private-regarding forms of associational life, such as belonging to an offline club or contacting an online hobby group.

Our other two observations relate to the research issue regarding whether there are distinctions between associational life and offline and online modes of democratic political engagement. Thus our third finding is that *both offline democratic engagement and online democratic engagement with the political system tend to be associated with political activities within civil and cyber society rather than those with most social groups or even community-oriented groups*. This observation can be contrasted with Putnam’s findings, since our analysis suggests that it is primarily involvement with political groups, rather than

forms of community involvement, that is associated with democratic activism—and this tends to hold true for both offline and online democratic engagement. This finding seems more consistent with Tocqueville’s analysis. While Tocqueville regarded community interactions in general as important for cultivating a culture of associative practices, he did not generally regard such practices as related to sustaining a democratic ethos in the political community.

Fourth, we find *a notable difference in the predictors of online and offline political participation*. While traditional markers of SES such as income, length of time living in the community, and age do matter for offline democratic engagement with the political system, these factors are not significant in predicting variation on our measure of online democratic engagement. Thus our results regarding offline participation are consistent with the predictions of the resource model of political participation (Verba et al., 1995), but our online political participation analysis qualifies the resource model by indicating that the resources supplied by age, education, years lived in community, and household income are not critical determinants of participation in an online democratic political engagement—which indeed is a significant finding.

While our research indicates that democratic practices are, indeed, occurring in cyber society—and in some ways that seem to differ from offline democratic engagement—it leaves important questions for further research. Empirical studies of the role of the Internet in supporting or supplanting offline community engagement would be useful for further specifying the relationship between civil society and cyber society. Additionally, research on the role that offline and online participation plays in the public policy process is important in order to understand the role the Internet plays in shaping local politics. Research could also examine the nature of online political discussions in terms of the role they play in opinion formation for members of the political community. In exploring such research issues, we will enhance our understanding of how cyber society might influence both our modes of democratic engagement and also the dialogue of governance between the political community and the authorities.

NOTES

1. More recently, researchers point to the reciprocal relationship between the institution of the household (or family) and the political system as another form of association that can be a politically relevant element in the constitution of the political community. The household constitutes an important site in cultivating political orientations (Myers-Walls & Somali, 2001) as well as its members’ proclivity to participate politically (Gray, 2003). Mary Ann Glendon (1995) describes the family as one of the key “seedbeds of virtue” and citizenship. Additionally, the household serves as an important unit for analyzing many of the relationships between the political community and authorities, insofar as

many of the demands household members communicate to the political system relate to needs and interests shared by those in the household (Wolfe, 1998). For this reason, we empirically evaluate some aspects of political practices and community life at the level of the household later in the article.

2. See, for example, the reliance on Tocqueville to explain the link between associations and democracy by arguing that associations cultivate a public-regarding ethos and facilitate pluralist interest articulation (Putnam, 1993, pp. 89–92).

3. The resource model is an attempt to go beyond the SES accounts by explaining the functional linkages between SES and participation.

4. For instance, the more similar the number of “yes” answers to “no” answers, the closer they will be spatially mapped. The more dissimilar the response patterns, the farther away they will be mapped. This technique then analyzes the similarity between variables and is not a case-level analysis. The distance between the points is calculated based on the standardized values (0,1) where 1 denotes the engagement with an activity. The formula for calculating the distance is: $D^2 = \sum (X_{aj} - X_{bj})^2$ where D is the distance and each X refers to a particular variable for each case (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1993, pp. 637–640). The process is iterated until an optimal fit is achieved accounting for all the variables.

5. A “generic” example of this would be dealing with the extremely similar DNA sequences between all mammals. Nevertheless, we can distinguish the varieties of species and, for example, taxonomically classify dogs closer to wolves than to cats.

6. Additionally, since the data on offline associations are binary (yes/no), we prefer MDS to a factor analysis because factor analyses have been shown to produce false factors, particularly when working with binary data (Brazill & Grofman, 2002).

7. Lessa (1990) notes that MDS is a preferred alternative in genetics because of the colinearity problems.

8. This figure is a function of the stress statistic which is calculated in terms of the disparities between the “best fit” location of the data and the actual data locations using Kruskal’s stress formula 1: $STRESS = ((\sum (d^2 - d^*)^2) / \sum d^4)^{1/2}$ where d^2 is the square of the distance and d^* is the square of the disparities. This value approaches zero as the iterative mappings better account for the observed data values. The r^2 value is the squared correlation between the disparities and distances. This produces a ratio of the variance accounted for by the model to the observed variance in the data (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994: 639–40). This value is intuitively similar to a regression r^2 in that it is a measure of the variance in the data accounted for. This statistic ranges from 0 to 1 and approaches 1 as the MDS solution approaches a perfect fit with the observed data.

9. This is in contrast to the undifferentiated views of civil society such as Putnam’s that take any group contact—for example, choral societies—to be a positive influence on democracy (see Putnam, 1995c).

10. For more information, see the American Association for Public Opinion Research site at http://www.aapor.org/default.asp?page=survey_methods/standards_and_best_practices/standard_definitions#response.

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APPENDIX 1: NATIONAL SURVEY OF 12 METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREAS (MSAs)

These data are from a probability sample of 12 U.S. MSAs (listed below). The data were collected using a random digit dialing drawing 100 respondents from each of the 12 MSAs conducted in the summer of 2003. The overall response rate for the survey was 44.3% using AAPOR response rate method 2¹⁰ :

$$\frac{(I + P)}{(I + P) + (R + NC + O) + (UH + UO)} \quad [1]$$

where I is number of completed interviews, P partial interviews, R refusals/breakoffs, NC noncontacts, O others, UH unknown if housing unit, and UO unknown other. The intuition underlying this formula is that the response rate is the number of interviews divided by the number of interviews, plus the number of noninterviews, plus all the cases of unknown eligibility.

The sample size is 1203. The respondents were 44% male, 56% female.

MSAs

1. Orange County, CA
2. San Francisco, CA
3. Olympia, WA
4. Austin–San Marcos, TX
5. Boston, MA
6. Des Moines, IA

7. Ft Collins–Loveland, CO
8. Middleton–Summerset–Hunterdon, NJ
9. Minneapolis–St. Paul, MN
10. Portland, ME
11. Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill, NC
12. Washington, DC–MD–VA

APPENDIX 2: QUESTION WORDINGS

Offline Community Life Questions

In the last year, (have you) (has anyone in your household) done any of the following? [Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

- a. Been a member of a local club or organization
- b. Attended a neighborhood event
- c. Planned a neighborhood event
- d. Held office in a local club or organization

Online Community Life Questions

As I read a list of groups, please tell me if you have ever used the Internet to be in contact with or get information from each type of group. (First/Next), how about. . . (read in random order) [Dispositions: often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), or never (1) unless otherwise noted]

- a. A local community group or association
- b. A group for people with whom you share a particular interest or hobby
- c. A political group or special interest group
- d. A religious group or organization

Government Web Site Questions

In the last year, (have you) (has anyone in your household). . . ? (read in random order) [Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

- a. Obtained information about government services on your local government web site?

- b. Downloaded forms for home related needs on your local government web site?
- c. Completed transactions like paying bills or taxes on your local government web site?
- d. Found out about past or upcoming local council meetings on your local government web site?
- e. Contacted public offices on your local government web site?

Offline Government Interaction Questions

Now I'd like to ask you some questions about activities not involving the Internet or email. In the last year (have you) (has anyone in your household). . . ? [Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

- a. Contacted a local public official on the phone, in writing, or in person?
- b. Visited a city office to complete transactions like paying bills or taxes
- c. Attended city council, planning commission, or similar meetings

Primary Source for Local News:

When you need to get information about local politics and community affairs, which source do you depend on the most? (Read in random order):

1. Television
2. Newspaper
3. Internet
4. Radio
5. Friends/family/neighbors
6. Some other source

These responses were recoded into binary variables for the first 5 options whereby 1 = primary source for news and 0 = not primary source for news.

APPENDIX 3

Correlations among all offline and online activities

	Offline club member	Attend neigh. event	Plan neigh. event	Held office in club	Online community group	Online hobby group	Online political group
Offline club member	1.00						
Attend neigh. event	.32**	1.00					
Plan neigh. event	.23**	.35**	1.00				
Held office in club	.45**	.24**	.24**	1.00			
Online community group	.25**	.21**	.20**	.22**	1.00		
Online hobby group	.16**	.10**	.12**	.12**	.36**	1.00	
Online political group	.15**	.12**	.12**	.16**	.37**	.31**	1.00
Online religious group	.16**	.13**	.15**	.13**	.31**	.26**	.23**

Note. Tau beta correlation coefficients; significant difference, ** $p > .01$ (two-tailed test).