

Internet and Political Engagement: A New Integrated Model of Cyber-Democracy¹

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Abstract

Why in many democracies is the public increasingly disenchanted with the core institutions of democracy, and disillusioned with the traditional channel of political engagement? Can the Internet provide a structure of opportunities that may revive political engagement? If recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, and now Libya were any evidence, we may be persuaded to accept that the Internet does have *some* role in reviving political engagement. However, *do received theories on cyber-democracy adequately explain the structure of opportunities created by the Internet for political engagement under various regimes?* This is the question of interest to the present paper. To investigate this question, we propose a method based on the principles of systems to integrate the received theories and empirical evidence into a single conceptual model to be able argue about its limitations. Utilizing our method, we demonstrate how current theories on cyber-democracy suffer from several limitations, primarily: their applicability only to democratic settings; their neglect of what motivates people to participate in political affairs or disengage from it in the first place; and their neglect of politically-relevant engineering realities. Overcoming such limitations, we argue, requires us to significantly broaden the theoretical bases. Starting with Plato's *Republic*, we demonstrate how the crux of major theories such as utilitarianism, libertarianism, and capability deprivation must be brought to bare to be able to explain why people participate in political affairs. Further, we incorporate the major theories on collective action to be able to explain when and how political pressure builds up from collective political engagement. Considering such a broader theoretical base, we offer a new integrated model of Internet and political engagement. We use the integrated model to organize the structure of opportunities created by the Internet such that a whole range of behaviors concerning political engagement may be explained. This work culminates in a set of hypotheses, generated from integrated perspective, for future research that will necessarily require us to broaden the information bases for when validating them empirically.

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1.0 Introduction

The topic of Internet's impact on political engagement has interested researchers for several years (Norris 2001). Motivation for such research comes from a deeper concern that, in many democracies the public is increasingly disenchanted with the core institutions of democracy, and disillusioned with the traditional channel of political engagement. Can the Internet provide a structure of opportunities that may revive political engagement? If recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, and now Libya, were any evidence, we may be persuaded to accept that the Internet does have *some* role in reviving political engagement. However, *do received theories on cyber-democracy adequately explain the structure of opportunities created by the Internet for political engagement under various regimes?* This is the question we will investigate in the present paper.

The inquiry in this paper is organized as follows. In the following section, we introduce a five-step methodology we have developed for this research. The subsequent five sections present the application our methodology to the question at hand. They synthesize the various theories of Internet and political engagement into a single integrated perspective, argue about the limitations of our current understanding of the topic, discuss relevant theories that could overcome these limitations, integrate these additional theories into a more integrated model of cyber democracy to generated richer hypotheses, and finally discuss challenges in pursuing such hypotheses.²

2.0 Method: Advancing Theory Through Principles and Models of Systems

In this section, we describe the methodology we have developed for the present research, invoking first its intellectual roots that lie in the study of systems. Our primary reason for acquiring systems perspective for this research is that, we construe *political engagement* as a behavior of the system as a whole, not of any individual component like technology, government, or citizenry.

We will first describe the principles of systems and its dynamics we have utilized for this research. Understanding these principles is foundational to understanding our research methodology.

2.1 Principles of systems and its dynamics

This research utilizes three key principles, each encompassing a different aspect of a system: behavior, state, and organization. The behavioral principle utilized is

² As the first step of our methodology synthesizes the existing literature, we postpone the discussion of literature until after the presentation of our methodology.

emergent behavior. The modern definition of emergent behavior reads as “behaviors of a system that are discovered (i.e., properties that were there but latent), those that emerge spontaneously over time or space, and those that arise in response to behavior of other systems and environments” (ESD 2004). This realization is not new. Aristotle, in his *Metaphysica*, expressed the same idea by saying “whole is greater the sum of its parts.” However, emergent behavior has become an important focus of system studies in the recent years. For this research, we construe political engagement as emergent behavior of a system where government, citizenry, and technology interact.

The organizational principle we utilize is *feedback*. In a simple definition, feedback is a closed path connecting in sequence the parts of a system in interaction (Wiener 1948). Feedback is important because it governs all growth, fluctuation, and decay in a system. Feedback structures are the organizing structures of change in real systems. Therefore, if political engagement were to rise or fall, for whatever reason, there must be a feedback structure that governs it.

One class of feedback system—*negative feedback*—seeks a goal and responds as a consequence of failing to achieve the goal. Such structures are therefore called balancing structures that counter any change, whether growth or decline, away from the goal. A second class of feedback system—*positive feedback*—generates growth processes wherein action builds a result that generates still greater action. Such structures are therefore called reinforcing structures that amplify change, so a growth leads to further growth and a decline to further decline (Forrester 1961).

The principle we utilize to understand the state of a system is this: “any system consists of two and only two types of variables—*rates* and *accumulations*. Accumulations determine the state of a system at a point in time.” (Forrester 1968) For example, birth and death rates determine the population, which is an accumulation that determines the state of an urban or national system.

Together, these principles highlight an important assertion this research makes. Construing political engagement as an emergent property argues that it is a higher order behavior of the whole that is not easily reducible into the lower order behaviors of the parts. The difficulty arises because the behavior of parts is non-linear. In theories of dynamic systems, such non-linearity arises due to accumulations in the system (Forrester 1968). In other words, this research argues that political engagement cannot be understood by analyzing behaviors of standalone components such as online behaviors of users, access to technology, or processes of governance.

2.2 Method

Figure 1 provides an overview of the methodological steps. We elaborate upon these steps with an illustrative example below. In doing so, we will also introduce a nomenclature (captured in footnotes) that we will use for model description through the rest of this paper.

Methodology Overview

- Step 1.** Identify and represent causalities from existing theories into a single conceptual model
- Step 2.** Identify the limitations of existing theories using principles of dynamic systems
 - a. Normative necessities: for each variable, ask whether all of the causes affecting it are represented? If not, which causalities must be included?
 - b. Dynamic necessities: for each accumulation, ask whether current conceptualization lets it attain all possible states at the extreme? If not, which causalities must be included?
- Step 3.** Explore additional theories where normative or dynamic necessities are not met in order to close such gaps
- Step 4.** Generate a new integrated perspective and the resulting hypotheses
- Step 5.** Identify research necessary to pursue the integrated hypotheses

Figure 1 Methodology Overview

Imagine that we are interested in studying theories of population growth or decline. The *first step* in our methodology would be to identify and represent causalities from existing theories into a single conceptual model. As depicted in Figure 2, such a step could lead to identifying an accumulation “Population” that increases with the increase of rate “Birth Rate,” and decreases with the increase of rate “Death Rate.”³

Imagine hypothetically that birth rate and death rate were the only theories we had access to; the *second step* would then be to identify the limitations of the existing theories using the principles of systems. We can do so in two sub-steps. The first sub-step (step 2a) would be to examine *normative necessities*, where we shall ask whether all of the causes affecting a variable are represented. As depicted by Figure 2, such an exercise may illuminate that, while Birth Rate and Death Rate are sufficient to determine Population, the rates themselves are determined by what fraction of population is productive (“Fractional Birth Rate”) or parishes (“Fractional Death Rate”).⁴ The second sub-step (step 2b) would be to examine the dynamic necessities, where we shall ask whether an accumulation in the system can attain all possible states; for example, in our case, can Population attain any non-negative value. Asking such a question would lead to upgrading our conceptual model to the depiction shown in step 2b of Figure 2, which can be interpreted as follows. The only way the Population can remain at a value of zero is when the birth rate depends upon population, so a population of zero or one cannot produce non-

³ Nomenclature Note: a box with a variable name inside depicts *accumulations*. A valve with a variable name depicts *rates*.

⁴ Nomenclature Note: the link between two variables X and Y (e.g., Fractional Birth Rate and Birth Rate) with a *positive* sign means that, all else equal, if X increases (decreases), then Y increases (decreases) above (below) what it would have been.

zero birth rate. Similarly, the only way Population can remain non-negative is when the death rate dependent upon the population, so when population goes to zero, the death rate must also go to zero.

The investigation in step 2 may expose several gaps where normative or dynamic necessities are not met, leading to our *third step*, where we explore additional theories to close such gaps. As depicted in Figure 2, steps 3 & 4, such an exploration may reveal that the Fractional Birth Rate is determined by the level of education, average age of the population, and by cultural propensity for procreation.⁵

The *fourth step* is to integrate the new causalities into the conceptual model. Here, given the scope of the research, it may be desirable to include only some of the causalities, while identifying those that are excluded and the impact of such exclusion. As depicted in Figure 2, steps 3 & 4, we may decide to exclude the cultural propensity to procreate from the model for appropriate reasons, while recognizing that doing so would prevent us from drawing conclusions about the impact of cultural differences on population levels. Such a process of integrating the conceptual model with additional theories allows for generation of novel, and integrated hypothesis. *Steps 2-4 are followed iteratively in our methodology.*

Once a satisfactory conceptual model is built by following the above steps, the final step, *step five*, would be to identify research necessary for pursue the new, integrated hypotheses. We will provide an example of this step after we have applied the method to the problem of interest to the present research.

⁵ Nomenclature Note: the link between two variables X and Y (e.g., Education and Fractional Birth Rate) with a *negative* sign means that, all else equal, if X increases (decreases), then Y decreases (increases) below (above) what it would have been.

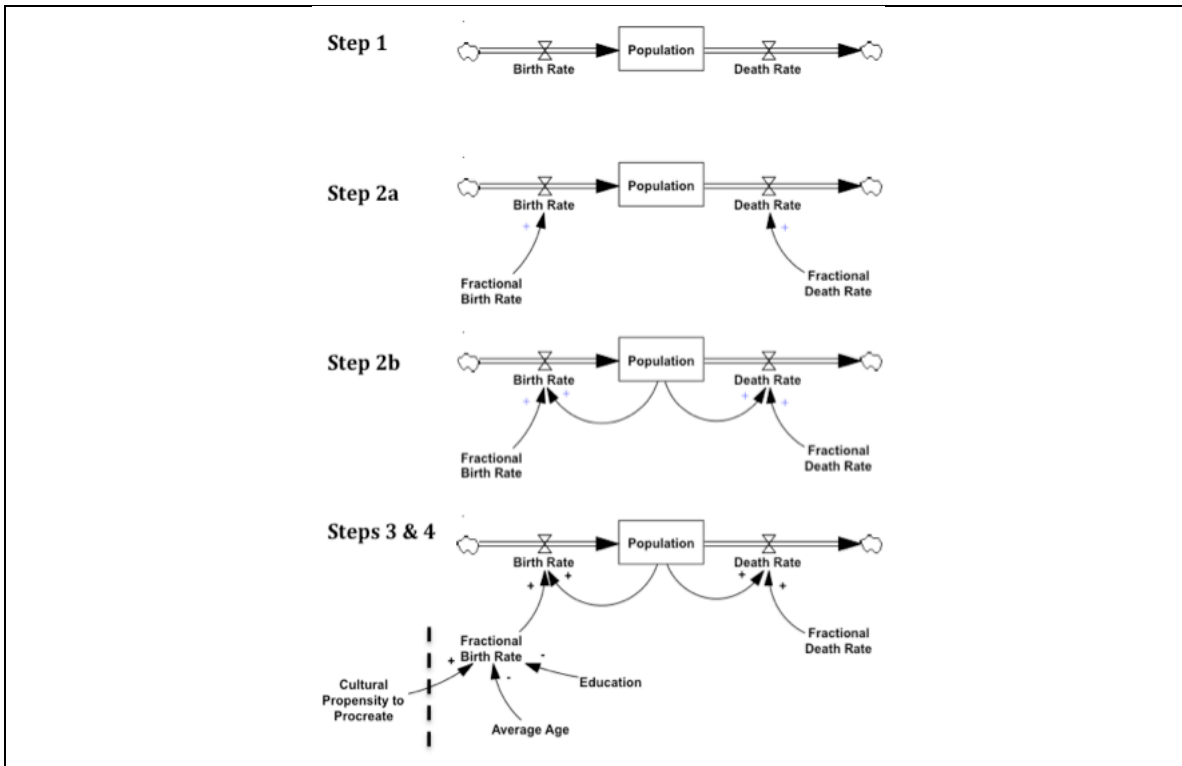


Figure 2 Methodology overview: an illustrative example

3.0 A Single Conceptual Model of Internet and Political Engagement: Present Theories and Empirical Evidence

Let us now apply the above methodology to the problem at hand. As per the first step, we will begin by creating a conceptual model of the existing theories on Internet and political engagement in this section.

The definition for political engagement has evolved over several decades (Verba and Nie 1972, Nelson and Harvard University. Center for International Affairs. 1979). As we conceptualize political engagement to be an emergent property of the system as a whole, we begin by accepting a definition for it that is most general yet precise (Conge 1988):

Political engagement refers to individual or collective action at the national or local level that supports or opposes state structures, authorities, and/or decisions regarding allocation of public goods.

Conge emphasizes three aspects of the definition. First, the action can be verbal or written. Second, it can be violent or nonviolent. Third, it can be of any intensity.

Several aspects of the above definition are important to note. First, the definition focuses on the *act* of political engagement, and excludes the *intentions* for doing so as well as the *outcomes* resulting from it. Second, if activity is not focused upon

national or local state structures, authorities, and/or decisions to allocate public goods, then it is *not* political engagement.

3.1 Big Picture: Resources and Motivation

In 2001, Pippa Norris, in her influential work, *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide*, offered a hypothesis that “the opportunities for information, networking, and communication via digital technologies *might* affect patterns of civic engagement, either *reinforcing* those citizens who are already most active through traditional channels, or *mobilizing* new participants who are currently disengaged from the political process.” Here, *political engagement is a subset of all behaviors that constitute civic engagement*. Norris further identified that “individual or micro level *resources* and *motivation* determines who participates in the political system.” (Norris 2001).

Norris placed the above observation in a three-level Internet Engagement Model, which included national, institutional, and individual level analysis. Her work provides a meaningful starting point for our research as she synthesized several strands of literature that were then considered most relevant by the political scientists to the topic of digital democracy. For example, the concept of “opportunities,” more precisely institutional structure of opportunities, was built upon the work on collective action and new social movements (Tilly 1978, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). Resources, such as those of socioeconomic status, income and education, and motivational factors such as political efficacy and interest have long been part of the variables commonly used by political scientists to explain differences in conventional forms of political engagement through voting, party campaigning, and contact activity, in the United States and elsewhere (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978).

The above theories can be woven into a conceptual model as illustrated in Figure 3. Such a conceptualization assumes a world with two and only two types of inhabitants—politically engaged, and politically disengaged. Being unaware of political affairs or choosing to remain neutral, in this conception amounts political disengagement. By identifying those politically engaged vs. disengaged as accumulations, such a model measures them as populations; whereas, by identifying political engagement as a rate, it measures it as a frequency of such engagements.

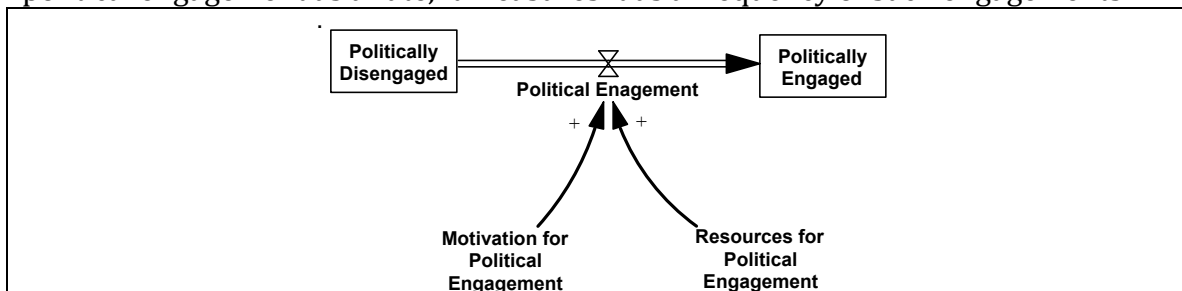


Figure 3 Mobilization, Reinforcement, Political Engagement, Resources, and Motivation

3.2 Three Major Hypotheses

Let us now draw a slightly different picture. Political engagement is commonly understood to include three distinct dimensions: *political knowledge* (what people learn about public affairs), *political trust* (the public's orientation of support for political system and its actors), and *political participation* (conventional and unconventional activities designed to influence government and the decision-making process). In other words, political knowledge, trust, or participation, as defined above, positively contribute towards political engagement. Such a view may be illustrated as in Figure 4.

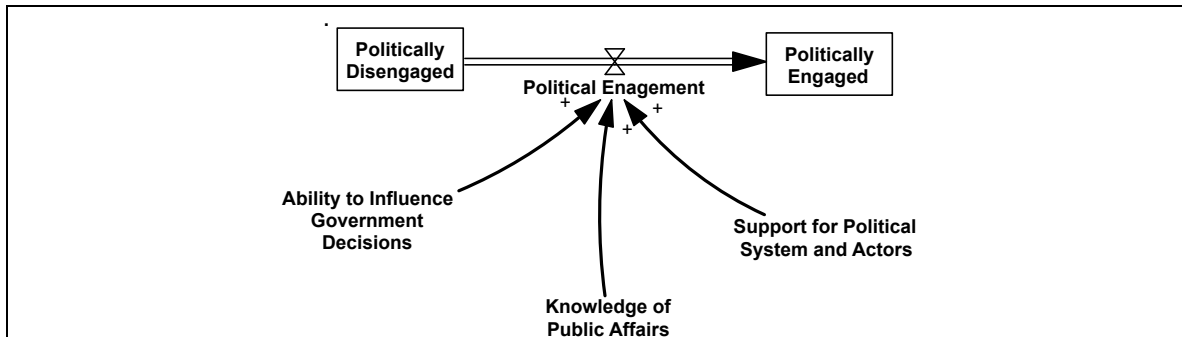


Figure 4 Three Dimensions of Political Engagement

Given the substantial literature on cyber democracy that claims that the Internet provides a distinctive structure of opportunity for reviving political engagement, one would hope to identify causal relationships that allow the Internet to reinforce all three dimensions of political engagement. We will now discuss theoretical as well as empirical research on cyber democracy that lets us identify such connections.

3.2.1 Political Trust

For political trust, we are interested in theories that connect being politically engaged to the support of political system and actors, and vice versa. The Internet is increasingly believed to be a global catalyst for disclosure of government information. Information can now be disclosed at relatively low cost without the traditional boundaries of space and time (Margetts 2006, Curtin and Meijer 2006, Welch, Hinnant and Moon 2005). These findings indicate that the Internet has increased transparency about how governments work. On one hand, such transparency is widely believed to lead to an open culture in government that benefits us all (Hood and Heald 2006). It is ultimately seen as “something good,” which will eventually increase citizen trust in government (Brin 1998, Oliver 2004). On the other hand, scholars have also argued that with greater transparency, people may be disenchanted with the government as they become aware of the chaotic nature of behind-the-scene workings of the government (Bovens and Wille 2008). As a result, transparency could contribute to political cynicism, and citizen trust in the government might even decline. Empirical evidence on political engagement and transparency leading to trust of political system and actors is available in European Union’s Eurobarometer survey data (Norris 2001), where those online were consistently found more trusting toward a wide range of social and political

institution as compared to those not online. More recent evidence from an experimental study in the Netherlands has indicated that people exposed to more information about the local council were significantly more negative regarding the perceived competence and honesty of the council as compared to those who did not access the available information (Grimmelikhuijsen 2010).

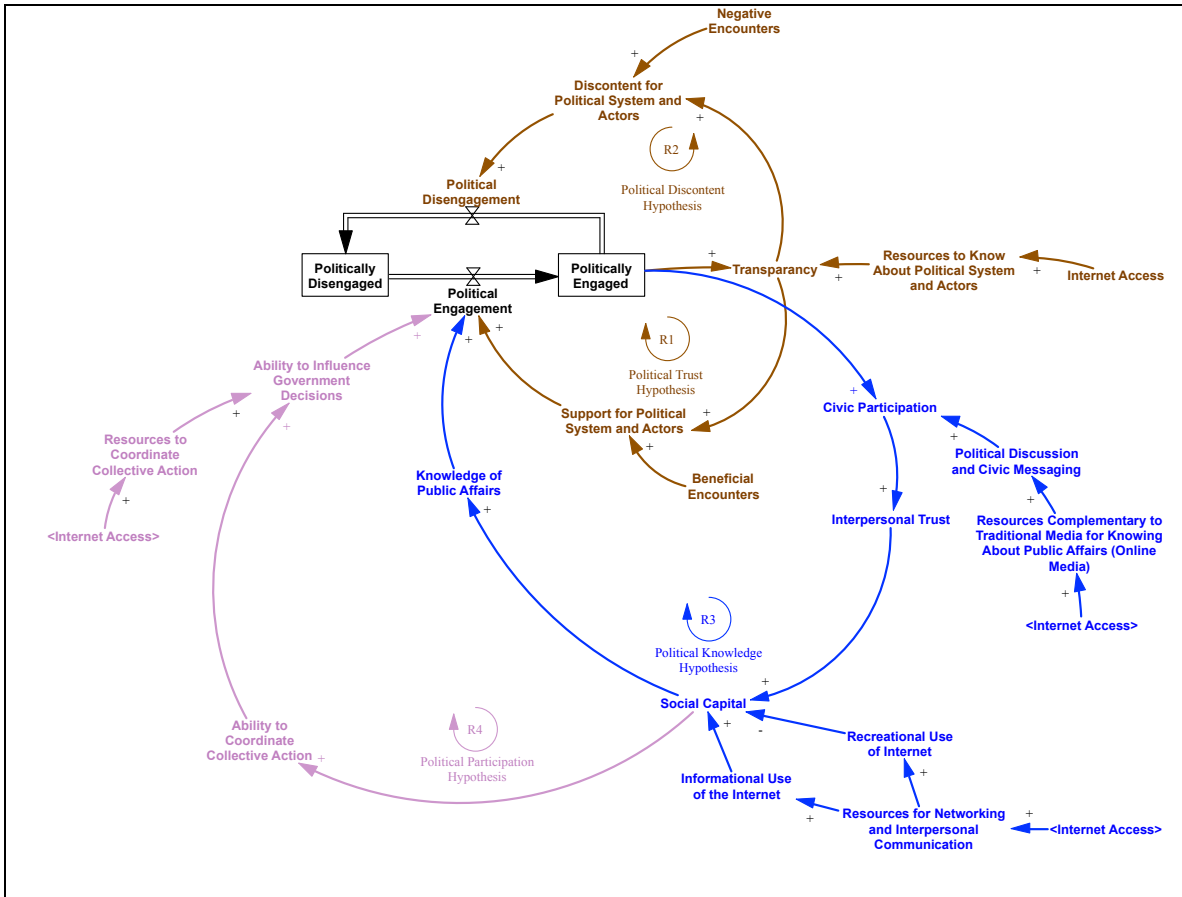


Figure 5 Three Dimensions of Political Engagement

The above relationships are represented in Figure 5 in red.⁶ These structures depict how greater Internet access is posited to catalyze two structures: Political Trust Hypothesis, R1, which increases trust and promotes greater political engagement; and Political Discontent Hypothesis, B1, which increases discontent and diminishes political engagement. The Internet provides resources to know more about political system and actors, either as disclosed by the government or by media and other sources. Increase in such resources, everything else being equal, increases transparency, which is a double-edge-sword. When citizens encounter a behavior they consider positive, it generates trust. On the other hand, when they encounter a behavior they perceive as negative, it generates discontent.

⁶ A note to the reader: it may be beneficial to trace the relevant variables in the appropriate illustrations as you read the descriptions of the hypotheses.

Political Trust Hypothesis is a positive feedback (reinforcing) structure, meaning a positive perturbation in any variable involved in this relationship produces further positive perturbation, and a negative perturbation produces further negative. For example, increased trust leads to further increase of trust, but decreased trust leads to further decrease of trust, holding all else equal. Political Discontent Hypothesis is a negative feedback (balancing) structure, meaning either positive or negative perturbation in any variable involved in this relationship produces forces to counter the direction of the original perturbation. For example, if discontent rises, less people will be politically engaged who could be discontent, leading to reduction in overall discontentment; again, holding all else equal.

3.2.2 Political Knowledge and Political Participation

We now turn to the other two dimensions – political knowledge, and political participation. The discussed to follow can be traced in two additional hypotheses, Political Knowledge Hypothesis, shown in *blue*, and Political Participation Hypothesis, shown in *pink*.

For political knowledge, we are interested in theories that connect being politically engaged to knowledge of public affairs, and vice versa, whereas for political participation, we seek theories that connect being politically engaged to the ability influence government decisions, and vice versa. Such connections can be initiated because political scientists and sociologists view political engagement as a form of civic participation (Norris 2001), which is defined as “individual or collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.”⁷

Empirical research has demonstrated that Internet access influences civic participation positively by offering access to online media, which is found to be complementary to traditional media such as print and broadcasting, and as fostering both political discussion and civic messages (Shah et al. 2005). It is important to remember that since our methodological focus is to synthesize the relevant literature into a single conceptual model, establishing a link between Internet access, online media, and civic participation merely acknowledges the existence of such a link. Such an acknowledgement, however, subsumes under it many nuances disaggregated by much empirical research. For example, research on civic participation has focused on the impact of differences along at least three dimensions: technology (print, broadcasting, and Internet), demographics (age groups, geography, socio-economic strata), levels of analyses (individual, community level), and type of media use (informational, recreational (Shah, McLeod and Yoon 2001b).

Civic participation is known to promote interpersonal trust at the individual level (Nie 2001). Such a relation has been posited as being reciprocal, so “the more we

⁷ American Psychological Association
(<http://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/civic-engagement.aspx>)

connect with other people, the more we trust them, and vice versa" (Putnam 1995, Brehm and Rahn 1997). For a community, frequent cooperation by its members is expected to lead to tighter social linkages and increased trust in one another. Support for this idea can be found in experimental research focusing on iterative prisoner's dilemma games-cooperation begets trust, which leads to further cooperation (Axelrod 1997). Although determining the flow of causation outside the laboratory has been methodologically complex, reported evidence suggests that suggests it flows mainly from participating to trusting (Shah 1998).

Social capital is the concept that provides a way to further understand how civic participation could impact both online and offline communities that may or may not be currently politically engaged. Social capital is defined by some today to mean, "the resources of information, norms, and social relations embedded in communities that enable people to coordinate collective action and to achieve common goals" (Shah et al. 2001b). Such a definition is a more information-focused version of the original, where social capital was defined as "a web of cooperative relationships between citizens that facilitates resolution of collective action problems (Coleman 1990). Thus, social capital increases with increase in both interpersonal trust (cooperation) and the ability to connect (connectivity offered by Internet access). More importantly, since the conception of social capital includes relationships that could be both online and offline, and whether the members of a network are politically engaged or disengaged, it provides a way to argue that civic participation could potentially have an impact broader than simply reinforcing participation among those already engaged politically.

Empirical analysis in American setting has demonstrated that while Internet does provide a way for networking and interpersonal communication, the type of Internet use determines the polarity of influence on social capital. Informational uses of the Internet are positively related to the production of social capital, whereas social-recreational uses are negatively related to it (Shah, Kwak and Holbert 2001a). Further, when differences in age cohort and media usage is considered, it is found that among the youngest adult Americans, use of the Internet for information exchange more strongly influences social capital than do uses of print and broadcast news media (Norris 1999, Shah et al. 2001b).

Social capital integrates mass and interpersonal communication into the processes of political knowledge and political participation (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Political knowledge side of the linkage exists as frequency of political talk with family and friends has been highlighted as a key variable in increasing knowledge of public affairs. The assumption is that individuals who discuss politics frequently are exposed to a wider range of political perspectives, and this exposure increases their interest in public affairs, especially politics (Mutz 2002).

Political participation side of the linkage arises as social capital increases the ability to coordinate collective action, which in democratic theory has been known to increase public's influence over government decisions (Olson 1965, Tilly 1978).

Online communication about politics is believed to further increase the ability to influence government decisions, as it not only permits citizens to gain knowledge but also allows them to coordinate their actions to address joint concerns (Bimber 1998, Davis 1999).

In Figure 5, the Political Knowledge Hypothesis depicts a reinforcing feedback loop, R2, which is posited in literature as a virtuous circle that the Internet could catalyze, as it provides resources for increasing both civic participation and social capital. The Political Participation Hypothesis depicts another reinforcing feedback loop, R3, which posits how Internet catalyzes political participation by providing resources for collective action. Integration of theory and empirical research, such as the one in Figure 5, would also posit that the above structures are virtuous for political engagement only as long as the Internet, on balance, is used for informational purposes, and not for social-recreational purposes; that is, if one were to argue purely on the basis of what has been shown empirically.

The conceptual model in Figure 5 depicts structural forces related to the Internet that causes political engagement (disengagement) that are identified by the received scholarship. In the next section, we will investigate whether this structure has limitations.

4.0 Limitations of the current theories on Internet and Political Engagement

We are now ready to identify the limitations of the existing theories by applying step 2 of our method, where we look for unmet normative and dynamic necessities. We will discuss these limitations with reference to Figure 6, where the conceptual model that resulted from existing theories (same as Figure 5) is in *black*, and new links arguing the limitations are other colors (*red, blue, orange, and pink*).

4.1 Neglect of Motivation

The most serious limitation of received research on Internet's influence on political engagement is its neglect of motivation. Theory of political engagement clearly identifies both resources and motivation as necessary elements for political engagement. However, empirical research has focused primarily on investigating how Internet offers resources for political engagement. Important questions around the origin and nature of motivation have been neglected. By offering an additional avenue for information exchange, the Internet quite naturally provides resources for increasing civic participation. But if we neglect questions of where motivation comes from, whether it is the motivation to use the Internet for political engagement or to engage politically altogether; all lessons learned about Internet's influence on political engagement can only be accepted conditional to the motivation being present.

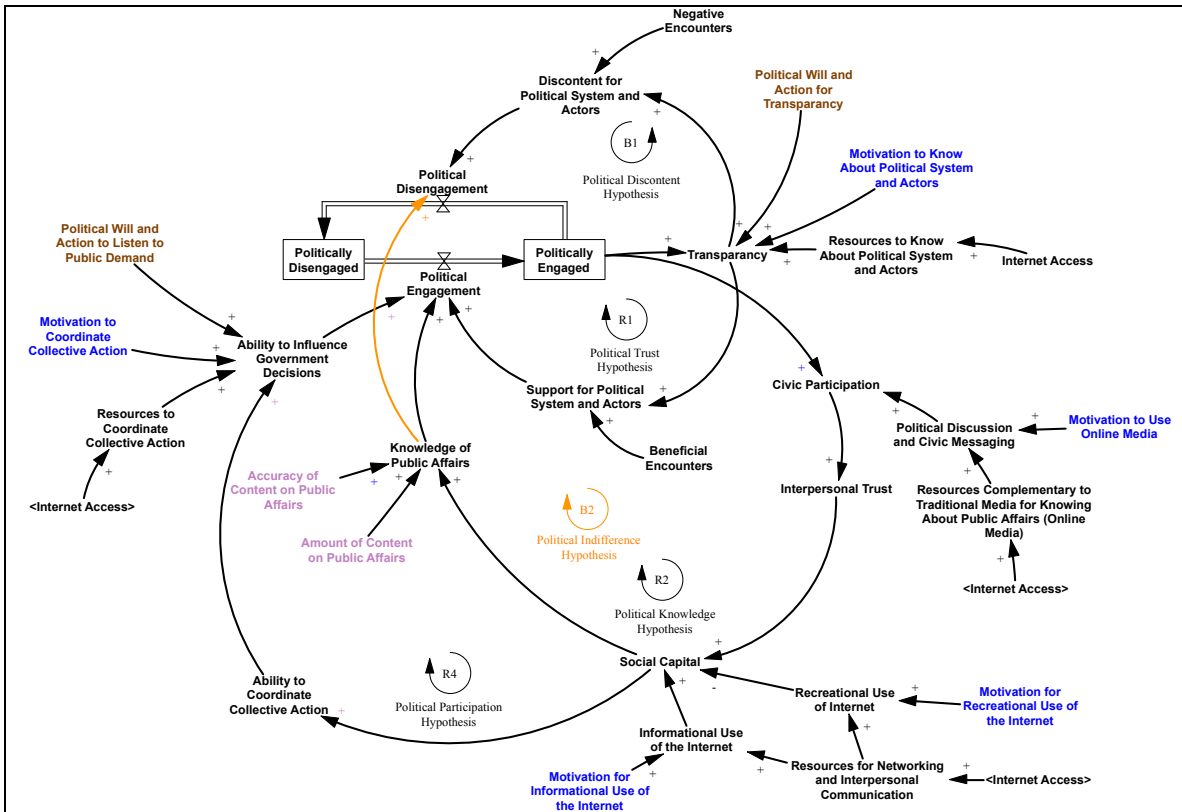


Figure 6 Limitations of the Existing Theories

This observation has important implications for studying the impact of Internet on not just political engagement but on several other areas. For example, similar questions arise in the area of Internet’s impact on education, especially since affluent students or schools equipped with the Internet are not necessarily the ones most motivated to study. Including motivation would require understanding where motivation for political engagement comes from, and whether and how the Internet relates to it.

Figure 6 shows the motivation-related outages in blue. These outages can be found by simply probing the first-order normative necessities of the variables where the Internet is found to supply a resource. For example, Internet access already provides resources for coordinating collective action (left side of Figure 6), but where does the motivation to coordinate collective action come from? Only if we include motivation-related variables can we satisfactorily answer how Internet influences aspects such as transparency, political discussion, informational vs. recreational use of the Internet, and the ability to coordinate collective action—in other words, affects political engagement.

4.2 Limited to Democracy (Presumed Presence of Political Will)

Much of the research on Internet and political engagement assumes a democratic setting, where political will to listen to the public, and the processes for influencing it by individual or collective action are presumed to be present. Such an assumption is natural with a topic like political engagement, and is further reinforced through

empirical research because of the ease of data gathering in democratic settings. Recent upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, etc., have demonstrated, however, that the Internet *does* seem to influence political engagement in less democratic settings as well. More importantly, the variation in regime's response in these places, which ranged from disconnecting the Internet to utilizing it for false propaganda, indicates how important is the political will in determining how the Internet is utilized or controlled when it used as means for political engagement. For this reason, several variables in the conceptual model we have constructed, like Ability to Influence Government Decisions and Transparency, depend heavily on political will and action. These additions are marked in Figure 6 in *red*.

4.3 Indifference to Politically Relevant Engineering Realities

Engineering research considers advances in computer networks, such as the Internet, as consisting of three dimensions: computers (e.g., PC, smart phones), network (e.g., narrowband or broadband Internet), and content (e.g., blogs, web pages, etc.). Research on Internet's impact on political engagement has focused more on network access as compared to the availability and accuracy of content on public affairs. This observation is more relevant when considering less democratic settings, where highly sensitive content on public affair could be desensitized through an elaborate technical and human censoring regime. In such situations, it is not enough to know whether citizens have access to Internet, and what online resources they can get to, but also how accurate is the information they ultimately access. The amount and accuracy of content on public affairs are represented in Figure 6 in *pink*.

4.4 Underemphasis on Political Disengagement

Research tends to focus on Internet's role in political engagement. The possibility of Internet paying a role in political disengagement is largely underemphasized. As shown in Figure 5, the only available hypothesis for political discontent blames transparency for it. Of course, we know that political discontent can grow even in rather opaque political system, causing once politically engaged and vibrant democracy to become disenchanted with political affairs (e.g., present day Myanmar). To correct for this situation in our conceptual model, we have identified an additional link between Knowledge of Public Affair and Political Disengagement, shown in Figure 6 in *orange*, to indicate how just the knowledge of public affairs—not even interworking of the government—can lead to political disengagement, making citizens indifferent to political affairs. Such a connection adds a negative feedback (balancing) loop, B2, marked as Political Indifference Hypothesis.

5.0 Theories Addressing the Present Limitations

We are now ready to take step 3 of our methodology, and discuss additional theories that address the limitations we identified in the previous section. Some of the limitations, for example indifference to politically relevant engineering realities, are merely issues of carrying out additional empirical research. Such issues do not necessitate identifying additional theories. By contrast, issues of individual or

collective motivation for political engagement, political discontent, and political will do require identifying additional theories before generating meaningful hypotheses for empirical work.

5.1 Theories of justice and sources of motivation

In Plato's *Republic*, Book I and IX, Socratic dialogue establishes two aspects of the argument that identifies justice as the basis for individual or common political action: first, that only the just are capable of common action; second, that the notion of justice is the same at individual and more aggregate levels. This is the earliest argument in western philosophy connecting justice (or injustice) to political action (Plato, Jowett and Loomis 1942). We will now use this insight to delve into three major theories of justice: utilitarianism, libertarianism and Rawlsian justice, and capability deprivation. By doing so, we hope to understand what injustice means in each view, and how it could provide motivation for individual or collective action.

5.1.1 Utilitarianism

In its classical form, utilitarianism defines utility in terms of mental satisfaction, pleasure, or happiness. This idea pays attention to each person's well being, and considers well being as some form of mental characteristic (Bentham and Lafleur 1948). In one variation, utility is defined as desire fulfillment (Gosling 1969). In modern economic analysis, utility is often defined as some numerical representation of person's observable *choice*. The quintessential utilitarian formula for judging every choice is to do so by the sum total of utilities generated through that choice (Mill and Piest 1957). Utilitarianism was the dominant theory of justice for much of the 19th and early 20th century.

In this view, *injustice* consists in aggregate loss of utility compared with what could have been achieved. An unjust society, in this view, is one in which people are significantly less happy, taken together, than they need be. While the above perspective neglects concerns normatively relevant to justice such as rights and freedoms only because they do not concern utility; it is not absurd to think that loss of well-being, if only in aggregate, could motivate political action.

5.1.2 Libertarianism and Rawlsian Justice

Libertarianism emphasized "the property of liberty" that must not be violated, no matter what consequences follow from them. In its most extensive form, the theory argued that classes of civil rights—from personal liberties to property rights—have a nearly complete political precedence over pursuit of any other personal goals (Nozick 1974). John Rawls then presented a particular version of the libertarian theory in his seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, which has arguably been the most important, even if controversial, of the contemporary theories of justice.

In Rawlsian view of justice, the first principle states that, "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others," (Rawls 1971). In this view, the basic liberties of citizens include political liberty (i.e., to vote and run for office), freedom of speech and assembly, liberty of

conscience, freedom of personal property and freedom from arbitrary arrest. Compared to classical libertarianism, the construction by Rawls is narrow and moderate as liberties not on the list, for example, the right to own certain kinds of property (e.g. means of production), and freedom of contract are not considered basic; and so they are not protected by the priority of the first principle.

In both classical and Rawlsian perspective on libertarianism, basic political liberties and civil rights get absolute priority over things we may desire, such as utilities, well being, or equities of outcomes and opportunities. Violating this principle is *injustice*, and a motivation for political action. That said, however, the two perspectives do have different implications for motivating individual-level political engagement as compared to collective political engagement. By including property rights as one of the basic liberties not to be violated, the classical libertarian perspective could point to a source of motivation for individual as well as collective political engagement, as and when property rights are violated. This is not the case with the Rawlsian view, where the liberty or rights for the society are held as a priority, but societal level liberty or rights may not directly translate to personal advantage. Hence, loss of such rights is more likely to ultimately motivate collective political action than action at individual level.

5.1.3 Capability Deprivation

Amartya Sen has articulately argued that for many evaluative purposes, including the one we are contending with of justice as a source of motivation, the appropriate space is neither that of utilities, nor that of primary goods, but that of substantive freedoms—the capabilities—to choose a life one has reason to value (Sen 1999). A person's "capability" refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. The concept of "functionings" is based on Aristotelian roots, and reflects various things a person may value doing or being (Aristotle and Grant 1973). This perspective goes beyond a view where individuals *hold* utilities or primary goods, by including relevant personal characteristics that governs the *conversion* of such primary goods into the person's ability to promote her ends.

In this view, social *injustice* is the deprivation of capability. The evaluation of what "capability" means may involve either *realized* functionings (what a person is actually able to do), or the *capability set* of alternatives one has (person's real opportunities) (Sen 1995). There is a substantial literature on the particular functions, including basic needs, that should be included in the list and the corresponding capabilities (Basu, Kanbur and Sen 2009). Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine that deprivation of appropriately construed capability could motivate political engagement at both individual and collective levels.

5.2 Rational choice, regulatory capture, and sources of motivation

In the previous section, we reviewed theories of justice to uncover some sources individual and collective motivation. Of course, *injustice is not the only reason why citizens engage politically*. We will now briefly review two positivist theories – rational choice theory and theory of regulatory capture – to uncover sources of

individual and collective motivation for political action, particularly in situations that do *not* involve injustice.

5.2.2 Rational Choice

Coming out of utilitarian tradition, rational choice theory, offers a widely used framework for understanding social and economic behavior utilized in present day microeconomics, political science, sociology, and psychology. Rationality is here equated with "wanting more rather than less of a good" (Becker 1976). Rational choice theory observes that in any situation, "individuals act as if balancing costs against benefits to arrive at action that maximizes personal advantage" (Friedman 1953).

Rational choice theory does not concern itself with human's actual capacity to be "rational," nor does it concern with the individual's motivation behind utility maximization. These limitations, however, do *not* limit us from retaining rational choice as a source for individual-level motivation for political action, for reasons discussed next.⁸

5.2.3 Regulatory Capture

Regulatory capture occurs because groups or individuals with high-stakes in the outcome of policy or regulatory decisions can be expected to focus their resources and energies in attempting to gain the policy outcomes they prefer, while members of the public, each with only a tiny individual stake in the outcome, will ignore it altogether (Stigler 1971). Regulatory capture refers to a situation when this imbalance of resources devoted to a particular policy outcome is successful at "capturing" or influencing the regulatory agency such that the preferred policy outcomes of the special interest are implemented. This view is dominant in regulatory economics and can explain motivation for collective political action by industrial or professional groups.

⁸ For the human capacity part of the limitation, it is well established by now that humans are "boundedly rational;" meaning, rationality of individuals is limited by the information they have, the cognitive limitations of their minds, and the finite amount of time they have to make decisions Simon, H. A. 1957. *Models of man: social and rational; mathematical essays on rational human behavior in society setting*. New York,: Wiley.. This fact considerably weakens the "rationality" assumption by proving that individuals are not capable of indulging in sophisticated optimization of the kind rational choice theory imagines them to. However, it does *not* refute the premise that, despite such limitations, individuals do make a choice that they deem most beneficial. For the motivation part of the limitation, it is well established by now that humans do make choice for reasons other than utility maximization, such as moral and ethical reasons Sen, A. 1999. *Development as freedom*. New York: Knopf.. We have, however, considered this perspective in the previous section.

5.3 Theories of Political Disenchantment

We now turn away from the sources of motivation and towards the issue of political discontent. In the previous section, we argued that research has not sufficiently emphasized the issue of political discontent in the context of the Internet. We will, therefore, begin by discussing theories of political disengagement more broadly.

The issue of political disengagement itself has been of considerable interest to political scientists (Norris 1999, Dalton 2004). Independent instances of scholarship have identified various factors that cause people to disengage from the main stream of democracy, such as close ties between government and big businesses (Beetham 2005), inadequacy of local political institutions amidst globalization (Castells 2005), failure of media (M. 2005), political lying (Osborne 2005), and declining social capital (Putnam 1995). A more recent view of political disenchantment argues, in our opinion correctly, that since political disenchantment is phenomena universal to democracies, its causes must also be universal at some level (Stocker 2006). This view identifies four factors: (a) increasing individualization of the society that could deter people from an activity so inherently public like politics, (b) increasing specialization and professionalization of politics, (c) increased complexity of challenges that makes it difficult for citizens to imagine how they relate to them, and (d) a rising tied of cynicism fuelled in part by the practices of the mass media.

Of these factors, media is the one that is most directly impacted by the Internet. Media has been blamed to promote a culture of cynicism by poor reporting that includes, “dumbing down” news and simplifying truly difficult political choices; confusing facts, opinions, and speculations; spreading culture of contempt; and acting as champions of the public by taking adversarial positions to politicians, whether or not it is necessary to do so (Lloyd 2004).

Thus, the above discussion demonstrates that, while the drivers of political discontent go far beyond the Internet use, the knowledge of public affairs through media use does link to political disengagement. This argument, thereby, provides a way to address the underemphasis of political discontent that we had identified in the previous section.

5.4 Theories of Collective Action in a More Networked Society

Sociologists have long investigated sources of similarities or dissimilarities among different groups as drivers of collective action like social movements (Marx 1964). While the Internet does seem to play a role in connecting like groups, a perspective from political economy by Mancur Olson, which speaks to the costs and benefits of collective action, may have more immediate implications for an increasingly networked society. The Olsonian view argues that collective action is less likely when the cost of political action demanding public good is concentrated on the actors, but the benefits of having access to the good are diffused over (available to) all. In such a situation, individuals in any group attempting collective action have incentives to “free ride” on the efforts of others if the group is working to provide

public goods. In this view, therefore, collective action is harder for large groups to organize due to high organization costs (Olson 1965).

This perspective is important for us to include because the received scholarship on Internet and political engagement has already argued that the Internet could provide resources to coordinate collective action. Later in this paper, we will use this perspective to ask questions about what the Internet could do to actual and perceived costs and benefits of engaging in collective action.

5.5 Limitations of this section

As we proceed further, the theories we have discussed in *this* section should let us overcome three of the four limitations of the received research—namely, neglect of motivation, exclusion of politically-relevant engineering realities—that we identified in the previous section. However, we have not included here the theories that could address the fourth limitation, the question of what shapes the political will. The primary reason for this exclusion is that, the sources of political will in non-democratic settings are less well understood. Also, the public pressure seems to work even in less democratic settings. We therefore proceed further in this research with an assumption that the political will exists for the governance to be at least somewhat transparent, and responsive to public pressure. In other words, the new integrated model of Internet and political engagement presented next is more applicable to settings where such a political will is present, even if varying in degree.

6.0 A New Integrated Model of Cyber Democracy: Emerging Integrated Hypotheses

We are now ready go on to step 4 of our methodology, where we will develop a new conceptual model that will integrate the theories we identified in the previous section so as to address the limitations of the current perspective. We will refer to our model as the *Integrated Model of Cyber Democracy*. We had integrated the existing perspectives in Figure 5 with the help of four hypotheses: Political Trust Hypothesis, Political Discontent Hypothesis, Political Knowledge Hypothesis, and Political Participation Hypothesis. Our goal in this section is to present the new integrated model in reference to these hypotheses, as much as possible.

In the previous section, we uncovered several theories that speak to the sources of individual and collective motivation. Table 1 summarizes these sources. The identification of whether a sources could motivate individual, collective, or both types of collective action is as identified by the theories.

Theory	Motivation from...	Individual	Collective
Utilitarianism	Loss of well being		Y
	Loss of aggregate utility		Y
Libertarianism and Rawlsian Justice	Property Rights Problems	Y	Y

	Violation of Political Liberties		Y
	Violation of Civil Rights		Y
Capability Deprivation	Capability Deprivation	Y	Y
Rational Choice	Utility Gain	Y	Y
Regulatory Capture	Utility Gain		Y

Table 1 Sources of Motivation

We have organized the presentation of our Integrated Model of Cyber Democracy in a progression of three steps: Hypotheses of Individual Political Engagement, Hypotheses of Collective Political Engagement, and Connections between Individual and Collective Political Engagement. For clarity sake, we represent links already identified by existing theories (i.e., in Figure 5) with *black*, links added on the bases of additional theories in *blue*, and links already discussed in this section in *grey* to help the progression.

6.1 Hypotheses of Individual Political Engagement

Hypotheses of individual political engagement are those that explain causes for individual political action on the bases of individual level motivational factors *and* resources, available in the context of the Internet. Discussed next are four such hypotheses.

6.1.1 Individual Participation due to Political Discontent Hypothesis

This hypothesis explains how individual level political engagement could occur from political discontent (see Figure 7, structure R1).⁹ It has been posited already that Individual Discontent for Political System and Actors¹⁰ could grow with increased transparency. We further posit that this is more likely to occur in an environment where individuals encounter more property rights problems, deprivation of basic capability, or loss of utility—the situation we collectively refer to as, Unjust Encounters at Individual Level. Individual’s discontent for political system and actors motivates her for *corrective* political action. We define *corrective political action to mean, action demanding a change in the behavior of existing political system or actors.*

As already shown, the Internet does provide resources for individual level political action; for example, by offering an avenue to express their opinions, or to even file complaints and so on. Though there are no good measurements available of the *actual* cost of political action, one can imagine that the resources provided by the Internet could reduce the actual cost of political action. There are of course two additional dimensions researchers have not measured which we must, *perceived* costs and benefits of individual level political engagement. Individual level

⁹ Please note that this is different from discontent causing *disengagement*, which will be discussed next.

¹⁰ A note for the reader: it may be beneficial to trace the relevant variables in the appropriate illustrations as you read the descriptions of the hypotheses.

engagement. A subtlety not shown in Figure 7 is this: in a broader scheme, under the assumption of a functioning democracy, such a structure is ultimately a balancing structure, as the political discontent rises until the point where corrective measures get taken to lower the injustice.

6.1.2 Individual Disengagement due to Political Discontent Hypothesis

According to this hypothesis, individual's discontent for political system and actors could lead to political disengagement (see Figure 7, structure B1). This hypothesis relies upon arguments we have already discussed in section 5.3 that, individuals can be disenchanted with political system for a variety of reasons, such as political system seen as hostage to big businesses, ineffective due to globalization, and so on.

This hypothesis posits a balancing feedback structure as disengagement must stop in an extreme situation when no politically engaged individual is left in the system under consideration.

6.1.3 Individual Participation due to Political Trust Hypothesis

We now discuss a hypothesis that explains individual level political participation due to *trust* of political system and actors. Here, we will go beyond the Political Trust Hypothesis posited in the literature by providing bases for both resources and motivation. It has been already argued that individual level trust in political system and actors could rise with increased transparency. We further posit that this is more likely to occur when individuals are benefited (gain utility) by the present political system, government policies, and behavior of political actors—a situation we refer to as, Profiting Encounters at Individual Level. Individual's trust for political system and actors motivates her for *captive* political action. We define *captive political action* to mean, *action demanding a continuation of the behavior of existing political system or actors*.

We have already discussed that the Internet provides resources for individual level political action. Such motivation and resources then lead to individual level political action demanding captive measure that benefits her, which contributes another form of political engagement. This hypothesis posits a reinforcing feedback structure, where trust in a profiting environment causes further trust, and hence further political engagement.

6.1.4 Individual Discontent due to Political Knowledge Hypothesis

We now turn to two hypotheses that involve political knowledge, first to discuss the connection of political knowledge to discontent, and then to trust. We posit that one source of motivation for using online media is the individual discontent with political system and actors. It has been already shown how the Internet provides resources complementary to traditional media. When such resources combine with motivation, it would increase the use of online media, and thereby increase individual's knowledge of public affairs; of course, assuming accurate content on public affairs is available. Increased knowledge of public affairs, in an unjust

environment, could increase individual level discontent of political system and actors.

This hypothesis posits a reinforcing structure, where the media use in an unjust environment by individuals discontent with the political system could cause further discontentment. Importantly, it connects political knowledge to political discontent (see structure R4, R1 and B1 in Figure 7), arguing how political knowledge could accelerate either corrective political action (structure R1) or growing political disengagement (structure B1), or both.

6.1.5 Individual Trust due to Political Knowledge Hypothesis

Motivation for media use could also come from individual level support for political system and actors. In such a situation, just as in the case above, the individual's knowledge of public affairs grows through media use. However, in an environment, where individual's encounters are profiting them, individual's support for political system and actors grows (see Figure 7, structure R2).

This hypothesis posits a reinforcing feedback structure, where use of online media by individuals in a profiling environment could generate more trust of political system and actors. More importantly, it connects political trust to political knowledge (see structures R3 and R2 in Figure 7), arguing how knowledge of political affairs could lead to captive political action, where those benefiting from current system benefit further.

6.2 Hypotheses of Collective Political Engagement

Hypotheses of collective political engagement are those that explain causes for collective political action on the bases of collective motivational factors and resources in the context of the Internet. Discussed next are two such hypotheses. In the process, we further integrate our Model for Cyber Democracy as shown in Figure 8. The links in *grey* are those already discussed with Figure 7.

6.2.1 Collective Participation due to Political Discontent and Knowledge Hypothesis

This hypothesis explains how collective level political engagement could occur from political discontent and knowledge. Let us first discuss political discontent related causes (knowledge related causes for the same hypothesis will be discussed in the next section, where we connect collective political action to individual).

We begin by positing that collective discontent for political system and actors arise in a transparent system where there is injustice that can be felt at a collective level, like violations of political liberties and basic civil rights, general loss of well being, property rights problems, and capability deprivation—a situation we collectively call Unjust Encounters at Collective Levels. Such collective discontent for political system and actors provides motivation for *corrective* political action.

Research has already shown the Internet provides resources to coordinate collective action; for example, via social networking sites such as facebook. In other

Assuming such motivation and resources do culminate in collective political action demanding corrective measure, it contributes another form of political engagement. This hypothesis posits a reinforcing feedback structure, where discontent in an unjust environment causes further discontent, and hence further political engagement. The same subtlety we reminded the readers about in the previous section must be kept in mind: thought not shown in Figure 8, in a broader scheme, under the assumption of a functioning democracy, such a structure is ultimately a balancing structure, as the political discontent rises only until the point where corrective measures get taken to lower the injustice.

6.2.2 Collective Participation due to Political Trust Hypothesis

This hypothesis explains how collective political engagement, such as regulatory capture, could occur due to political trust. We posit that collective trust for political system and actors arise in a transparent system where interests groups such as an industry foresees ways of profiting—a situation we collectively call Profiting Encounters at Collective Levels. Such collective discontent for political system and actors provides motivation for *captive* political action.

We have already discussed that the Internet provides resources for collective political action. Such motivation and resources lead to capturing regulation in a way that benefits them, which contributes another form of political engagement. This hypothesis posits a reinforcing feedback structure, where trust in a profiting environment causes further trust, and hence further regulatory capture.

6.3 Connections between Individual and Collective Political Engagements

We will now hypothesize how individual level political engagement could become collective political engagement (see Figure 9). The received scholarship has extensively investigated how the Internet could provide resources for increasing civic participation, and ultimately social capital; especially when it is used for informational—not social or recreational—purposes. We posit here that motivation for corrective political action could provide motivation for such information use of the Internet. As the social capital grows, it promotes the communication of individual's discontent to larger groups.

Connecting individual political engagement to collective also shows how individual political knowledge translates into collective participation due to discontent (see structures R4 and R5 in Figure 9).

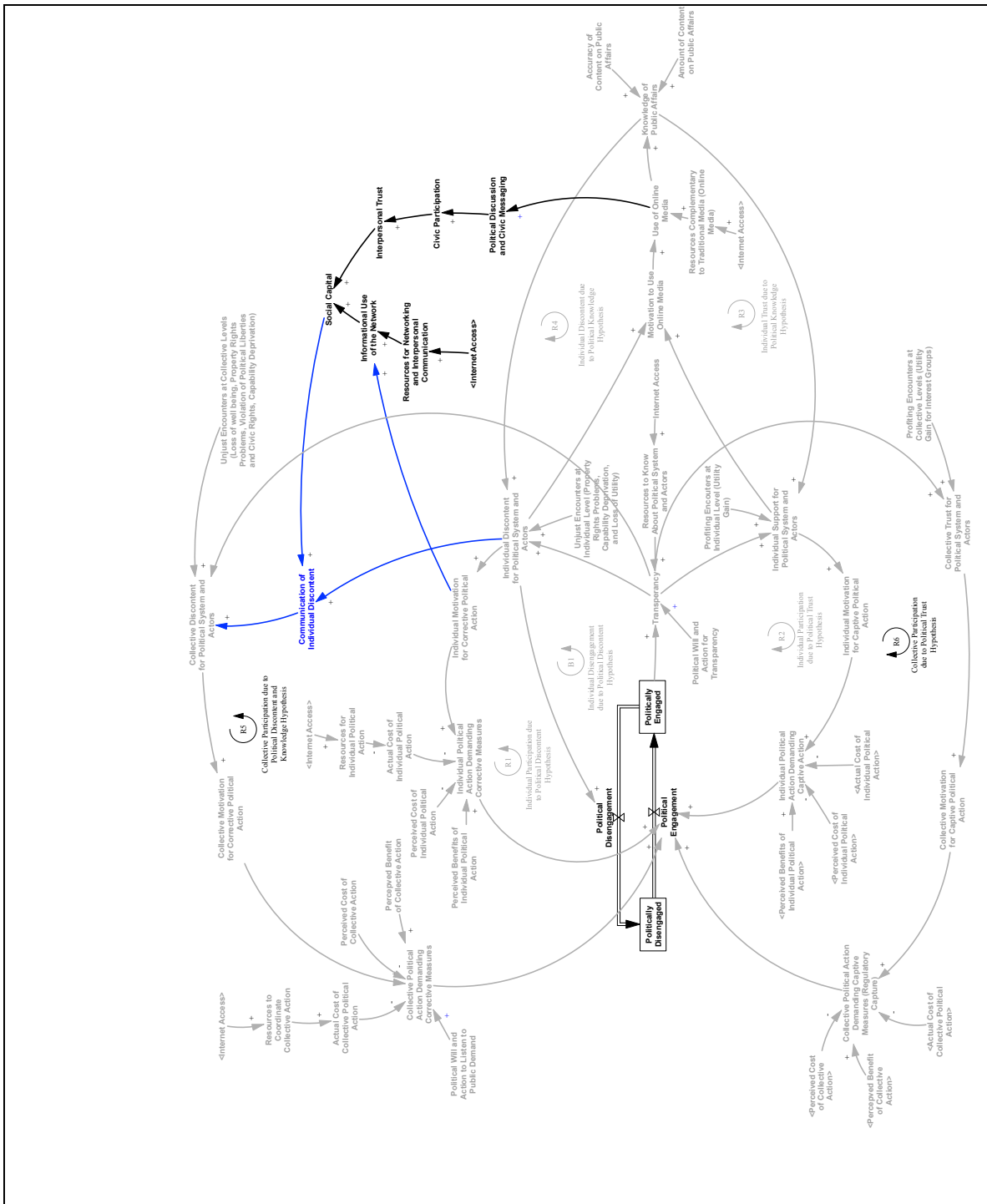


Figure 9 Connecting Individual and Collective Political Engagement

7.0 Conclusion: The New Model's Implications for Research on Cyber Democracy

In this paper, we integrated the existing theories on Internet's impact on political engagement into a single conceptual model, discussed limitations of the current

perspectives, and then offered a new model of cyber democracy that addresses many of these limitations. The new model organizes the structure of opportunities created by the Internet in the context of the political environment. On the basis of this organization, it offers explanation for how a whole range of behaviors may emerge concerning political engagement that the Internet could influence. These explanations either refine existing hypotheses or offer additional ones; but more importantly, they interconnect them. Investigating these hypotheses has important implications for how we do future research on Internet and political engagement. In concluding this paper, we capture two such areas of implications.

7.1 Understanding Political Engagement as Emergent Behavior

In this paper, we presented a view that political engagement (or disengagement) is a behavior that emerges due to various interactions. The previously identified components—orientation of trust, knowledge of political affairs, and ability to influence the government decisions—remain important to this view; however, our view goes beyond identifying just the presence of these dimensions. We show how these dimensions interdependent to ultimately cause political action, or inaction, at individual or collective levels.

Further, we distinguished between types of political engagement: corrective political engagement that arises due to discontent and aims to change the current behavior of the political system and actors; and captive political engagement that arises due to trust and aims to capture the political system and actors so as to continue the behaviors that benefit a select group.

The questions of whether a citizenry is likely to be politically engaged or disengaged; and if engaged, in corrective or captive action, are questions of the relative strengths of the structures presented in the new integrated model. Understanding the relative strengths of the various structures requires being able to test the new causal links we have posited (see Figure 7, Figure 8, and Figure 9).

7.2 Broadening Information Bases

Our model demonstrates how resources and motivations come together in various ways to produce individual or collective political action that may be for corrective or captive purposes. Unfortunately, the received research on the Internet and political engagement does not seek information on the motivational aspects.

The received research has focused on independent variables like presence or absence of Internet access; various demographics such as age, gender, education; and more recently, transparency. The dependent variables it has focused on include amount of use of online media for seeking political information; level of online discussions about politics, political campaigning, contacting the politicians; level of offline political discussion; level of political trust; knowledge of political institutions; perceptions about government's level of benevolence, competence, and honesty; and voting records. Such empirical work has let us answer questions about *whether* the Internet impacts political engagement. It has established that the Internet

provides resources for individual and collective political action. However, it has not, and *cannot*, answer questions of *why* people use the Internet for political engagement, and *in what way* (for corrective or captive measures). In other words, it has not answered questions of motivation.

Answering questions of motivation requires broadening the informational bases we use for such research significantly. It requires us to understand what are the political motivations of those who do, or do not, use the Internet for political engagement. Also, whether and how changes in individual or collective motivations alter their propensity to use the Internet. Or more importantly, whether Internet use alters individual or collective motivation for political action, and of what form (corrective or captive).

It is systematic collection and analysis of such data that will let us answer important questions, such as:

1. Can the Internet influence the various structures so as to change the tide from political disengagement to engagement? Or it is merely a catalyst that has no influence over motivation for political engagement?
2. How can places that have nearly similar Internet penetration have different levels and forms of political engagements?
3. Is the Internet more likely to favor the marginalized or the powerful (in other words, corrective or captive political action)?

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