CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE INTERNET

Neven Obradović

Assistant, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communications and
Journalism University of Niš, Serbia
E-mail: neven.obradovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Marta Mitrović[1]

Assistant, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communications and
Journalism University of Niš, Serbia
E-mail: marta.mitrovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Abstract
The domination of the Internet communication has caused
numerous questions which resulted in research undertakings
related to different fields. The questions concerning the efficiency
of this type of communication, especially of those reflecting on the
communication in the real world, have been continually
multiplying for the last few years. The focus of this research paper
is the correlation between the Internet use and civic engagement.
The question whether Internet use could accelerate the activism of
people or distract citizens from the real world, has been the crucial
issue explored in this paper. Conducting an online questionnaire
with Internet users in Serbia (N=254), with the aim of obtaining
the answer to the presented research question resulted in the
corroboration of the starting hypothesis - *The use of the Internet
has been in positive correlation with activism in the offline world*.
Respondents, being the everyday users of the Internet, confirmed
that they have a notable participation in online activities, which
are further growing into offline activities and thus achieving
success outside the Internet.

*Key words: Internet, Civic Engagement, communication,
activism, Serbia*

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, a gradual change to online communication has resulted in a complete domination of the Internet use in developed parts of the world. The Internet has become a business space, whose landscape is managed by private techno giants, and users of Internet services who were previously passive consumers have now become content creators. Tubella and Associates (2008) state that the:

> "Internet makes audio-visual consumption more diverse, leading to the creation of an entirely new multimodal, multichannel and multiplatform universe. "New technologies enable greater flexibility and mobility, thus supporting the managing of any activity, anywhere, in any space. By the diffusion of the means which enable participation in the process of production, editing and distribution of information and content, the consumer at the same time becomes an active creator who has the capacity to contribute to the occurrence and sharing of multifarious visions in the world in which they live" (Tubella, et al., 2008, p. 235, cited in Kastels, 2014, p. 171).

Milivojević sees the Internet as a "virtual space which possesses all the qualities of the social space and is inextricably linked to the real space" (Milivojević, 2017, p. 161). In the same place, the author quotes Mark Poster who considers that "the Internet is not just a thing or a tool, in fact it builds a special electronic geography, opens a specific digital space in which people feel like its inhabitants – 'netizens' […]. In that space we write to each other, purchase, fall in love, educate, do everything we do in real space. It is not just a tool helping us do something or a device by which we exchange messages, which was a common instrumental way of understanding in the era of the old media" (Ibidem). Until recently the unimaginable possibility of instant and to that extent massive dissemination of information is becoming an everyday occurrence for Internet users. The online space has changed the nature of the traditional information and communication system, creating the need for instant, globally available information. In that context, Đorić writes:

> "the beginning of the new millennium has been followed by tectonic disturbances both in the media and in the field of communications. The key factors are availability, speed and the cost of information. Somehow, everybody is present today in the information market, whether as an author, user or distributor and often all that together…Information, both textual and audio-visual are available at every point on the planet, while the boundaries of

time and space for communication completely disappear" (Đorić, 2008, cited in Vitković, 2013, p. 95).

Heather Savigny states that optimists in this area not only see the Internet as a method of communication but also as a tool potentially capable of causing significant changes in democratic processes, having in mind the interactive nature of the Internet which itself encourages citizens to publicly express their opinion and in that way influence the direction and decision-making processes of public authority. According to Savigny, the Internet:

> "represents a countervailing power against the traditional media's agenda-setting ability, and the attempts by the state, political parties and the traditional media to define and defend the status quo. Communication via the internet can be top-down and bottom-up, horizontal and vertical; a dynamic interactive two-way process. It is a medium as yet unharnessed and undistorted by competing interest of the media and political parties, both of which are, as yet, unable to set the agenda or control the parameters of debate. From this perspective, the internet embodies the Habermasian ideals of freedom of speech and information as the foundation through which public opinion may be formed" (Savigny, 2002, p. 5).

Delli Carpini also believes that the Internet, and new communication technologies related to it, have created an entirely new media environment that:

> "increases the speed with which information can be gathered and transmitted, (b) increases the volume of information that is easily accessible, (c) creates greater flexibility in terms of when information is accessed, (d) provides greater opportunity and mixes of interactivity (one to one, one to many, many to one, and many to many), (e) shifts the nature of community from geographic to interest based, (f) blurs distinctions between types of media (print, visual, and audio), (g) challenges traditional definitions of information gatekeepers and authoritative voices, and (h) challenges traditional definitions of producers and consumers of information" (Delli Carpini, 2000, p.346-347).

According to the author, all of the aforementioned characteristics can affect the motivation, capability and potential of each individual to engage in a public debate.

With the change of the communication channel, many researchers have been inspired and have, therefore, discussed the effects of such a change in the communication space and how it reflects on the overall behavior of people. Debates regarding Internet activities and their correlation to activism or

passivity in the real world have been ongoing. Have internet activities been taking internet users into an offline apathy, or, conversely, can it positively influence their activism or lead them towards the creation of new social movements? (Meikle, 2009; Norris, 2002; Hill & Hughes, 1999). In view of the possibilities that the Internet communication offers, including among other things, anonymity and interaction, activities on the "web" lead to a democratization of particularly closed spheres. Polat points out that the Internet offers the widest range of possibilities, especially when it comes to connecting people with the same interests. "Through these communities, there is a potential for capacity building, getting support and information from other like-minded people and encouraging further political participation. It is also cheaper and more convenient to organize around online communities" (Polat, 2005, p. 450). Deibert states that activities on the web will become more frequent and extensive to a degree which is going to enable participation in the creation of international politics. Indeed, there is almost no offline collectivity, who had not spread their activities online or started some of their activities on the Internet (Deibert, 2000).

Numerous case studies indicate that the Internet space is convenient for spreading the most diverse ideas. As Blood pointed out: "the most visible gain is a low-cost and global medium for disseminating ideas" (Blood, 2001, p.166). Kamps writes about the three functions of the Internet when the key issue is political engagement: *informative function, the function of articulation, the function of organization.*

Defining the first function Kamps states that: "anyone can communicate their political views online, in a timely manner, for example through blogs. In addition, primary sources published online should not be disregarded: legislative processes, printed materials, minute books of parliamentary debates, as well as access to archives, etc." (Kamps, 2011, p.296). However, the main issue is related to unfiltered online information. According to the author, the solution is the necessity for greater transparency, more validation of the plausibility of information, more orientational knowledge, that is, more information about information (Ibid).

According to Kamps function of articulation can have both, positive and negative implications. On one hand, everyone can articulate their demands, criticism, etc. On the other, "the more individuals or groups articulate, the more the probability of overlooking all other news" (Kamps, 2011, p. 297).

The function of organization refers to possibility for political minorities or initiatives to achieve great performance and efficiency in the part of internal communication, at small organizational costs. Kamp believes that the already described problem of information overload can have an impact on the organizational function of the Internet as soon as we leave the area of internal communication" (Ibid).

2. Previous research

When it comes to civic engagement, which is the central focus of this research, there are clear advantages of the Internet space for networking like-minded people gathered around the same activity.

For the purpose of the research paper, online civic activism had not only been observed as an online activity, but also as an activity which became popular in the offline world, after its online launch, and thus had a direct influence on the activities outside the web. Sey and Castells consider that:

> "The Internet can, indeed, be an appropriate platform for informed, interactive politics, stimulating political participation and opening up possible avenues for enlarging decision-making beyond the closed doors of political institutions. On the other hand, any technology – and this is particularly true of the Internet – is shaped by its uses and its users. Thus, bureaucratic politics will tend to use the Internet as a billboard for one-way communication" (Sey and Castells, 2004, p. 363).

The authors also add that the Internet is the right place for finding a communication medium for active citizenship. In addition, with the help of a communication medium, mass media filters and party machines can be avoided, but it can also help networking by confirming their civic autonomy (Ibid, p. 364).

The availability of the web is used by different communities of activists gathered around an idea: anti-war activists, human rights activists, environmental activists, etc. Hwang and co-authors conducted a research about the way of informing *dissenters* shortly before the invasion of Iraq. Their results showed that in a situation when their attitudes happened to be inconsistent with the information obtained from the mainstream media, they would search for online information. Dissenters, then, found a place for confronting arguments and further discussion. Shortly afterwards, it was shown that the Internet communication was the crucial factor which led to the strengthening of offline anti-war activism (Hwang, et al., 2006). Similarly, Gillan researched an online anti-war movement in Great Britain. Gillan's results showed that the anti-war politics among British people is much more noticeable in the online sphere. However, when they happened to be in the offline world, they were more engrained in nationalism and aware of the existing differences (Gillan, 2009).

Besides anti-war movements, numerous other movements' call to activism, both online and offline, can be found on the Internet. One such movement, concerning the self-representation of people diagnosed with HIV, was explored by Gillet. The author analyzed the possibilities of the mediation of information about HIV, regarding their personal problems, the way of

including them into the public sphere, by means of the Internet in this case (Gillet, 2003).

Internet activism can be regarded as an activism directed towards political participation. Authors investigating the area of political action, have analyzed the extent to which Internet activism is really observable in the number of circled voting papers. Bakker & De Vreese researched the correlation between the use of media, both traditional and new, and political participation found at respondents between 18-24 years of age. Their research showed that there is a positive correlation between the Internet use and different forms of political action, whereas that was not the case with the users of traditional means of information. Also, the correlation happened to be positive, but evidently weak. In the very title of the research (*Good news for the future? Young people, Internet use, and political participation*) they predicted a possible positive outcome for the future, suggesting the positive correlation between the use of the Internet and political participation of young people (Bakker, De Vreese, 2011).

Taking into consideration that 75 million Americans (approximately 37% of the adult population) searched for political information online during the election campaign in 2004 and that 20 million citizens followed political events daily on the Internet until the election day (Rainie, et al. 2005, cited in Xenos, Moy, 2007, p. 704), Xenos and Moy investigated whether changes in the way information was obtained can affect political and civic engagement. The authors analyzed the National Election Studies (NES), that is, the polls conducted before and after the elections, involving 1212 respondents. The results of the research indicated a positive link between political information being obtained on the Internet and civic and political activism. Moreover, the authors define the Internet as "a positive force for democratic citizenship" (Xenos, Moy, 2007, p.714).

On the other hand, Quintelier and Vissers researched young people in Belgium, with the aim of testing the correlation between the Internet use and activities outside the online world. The results showed that the time spent online did not affect the tendency towards active participation in the public life (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008).

Scheufele and Nisbet compared the influence of different types of traditional and Internet communications on political efficiency, knowledge and learning. The authors pointed out that on a normative level they were concordant on a great potential of the Internet, when it comes to informing citizens because it can: "overcome some of the shortcomings of more traditional communication channels by overcoming space or time constraints that limit coverage in newspapers or on television news programs and also by providing information in a customized format that satisfies individual preferences rather than being tailored toward a specialized audience segment"

(Scheufele, Nisbet, 2002, p. 68). However, based on a research which included a telephone survey and 468 residents of Tompkins County, New York, Scheufele and Nisbet concluded that the role of the Internet in promoting politically active role of citizens is minimal.

> "Regardless of the frequency with which people use the Internet for various informational or entertainment purposes, our analyses suggest that traditional mass media maintain a key role in promoting democratic citizenship. In particular, newspaper hard news use—at a local, national, and international level—is a crucial tool for disseminating information about political issues and processes among the public and, ultimately, one of the strongest predictors of participation in the political processes" (Scheufele, Nisbet, 2002, p. 69).

In conclusion, the authors indicate that the Internet creates a subjective sense of political efficiency among users, but it does not lead to objective changes in the sense of political engagement or users' political information. "And for the future, these findings strongly suggest that the false sense of personal efficacy that can be created by some forms of Internet use will not translate into real political empowerment unless traditional media channels supplement it. The road to renewed civic engagement appears to lead through news in print" (Scheufele, Nisbet, 2002, p. 70).

Khazaeli and Stockemer examined wider implications of the Internet use, more precisely, whether the increased use of the Internet had been correlated with an improved managment of the governments in different political regimes. The authors analyzed more than 170 countries in the period between 1996 and 2010 and proved the positive correlation. Also, they concluded that the Internet use had an impact on the ruling figures. In that sense, the Internet could be idealistically perceived as the controller of the governance (Khazaeli, Stockemer, 2013).

Don Tapscott stated the generations growing up in the digital environment cannot be satisfied with marginalized roles and by listening to solemn political speeches. Furthermore, their goals are: to be directly involved, bring in new ideas, to interact with politicians, analyze their work, insist on the integrity, because in digital environment they are able to quickly realize that a politician speaks one thing and does the opposite (Tapscott, 2011).

Analyzing the data from the national survey on civic activism conducted by a team of researchers of Georgetown University (USA) in 2005, Taewoo Nam (2012) has concluded the following:

1. **The Internet can, to a certain extent, have a positive impact on the equality among citizens, as well as on their political and civic**

activism. However, the author mentions that although the Internet can provide equal chances for political participation online to everyone, there are greater chances of the Internet being used for the purpose of political engagement by those who are certainly interested in politics (Nam, 2012, p. 95).

2. **The Internet not only strengthens the existing forms of political participation, but it also instigates new forms of online engagement.** According to Nam, the Internet has the potential for including the existing offline models of participation into the online sphere, and in that way facilitating political participation by individuals who have not been politically active on the Internet before (Ibid, p. 95).

3. **The strong predictors of online political activism are notably different from those of offline activism.** For example, younger Internet users tend to participate actively in the online segment of political participation, while older users do not show any particular interest for this type of activism (Nam, 2012, p. 96).

In conclusion, Nam suggested that it is hard to predict in what direction the influence of the Internet on political participation will develop. According to Nam, there are clear findings that indicate the Internet can cause the change of rules in this sphere (Ibid, p. 96).

Brian Krueger, pointed out that there are two views on the relation between the Internet and political engagement in the literature. "One predicts the reinforcement of existing participation patterns, and the other suggests a change in those patterns to include new types of individuals" (Krueger, 2002, p. 476). Krueger has empirically tested both claims and come to the conclusion that the Internet has the potential of attracting new individuals into the political processes. The results of a survey conducted during the presidential election campaign in 2000 in the United States, showed the Internet can be relevant for political engagement of citizens with low incomes. "Moreover, simply using the Internet allows individuals to acquire the medium-specific skills required to overcome the technical obstacles associated with the medium. This contrasts with the myriad challenges of acquiring traditional civic skills—challenges that many low-income individuals find difficult to overcome" (Krueger, 2002, p. 494). Kwak, Poor and Škorić analyzed whether Internet use contributes to the international engagement of individuals. The research conducted on a sample of 389 people in the city of Ann Arbor, Michigan unequivocally showed "that the Internet matters for international engagement. According to the results, the Internet connects individuals to the international community by helping them increase their knowledge of the world, facilitating their sense of belonging to the greater world, and motivating them to participate in international events and foreign volunteer opportunities" (Kwak, Poor, Škorić, 2006, p. 207).

The connection between the use of the Internet and activism is particularly important in countries where human rights and the possibility of freedom of expression are politically endangered or limited. (Postill, 2014; Liu, 2011; Lonkila, 2008; Danitz & Strobel, 1999). According to Baringhorst, the expansion of the Internet has given an opportunity to political figures lacking the resources, to avoid the selection of gatekeepers in the mass media.

> "The technical structure of Web 2.0 is particularly prone to the withdrawal of mediators in political communication. By means of wikis, blogs and platforms such as social networks, it creates new incentives for overcoming passive behavior of media recipients and advances the formation of an innovative media activism on a global scale, based on an independent media production" (Baringhorst, 2011, p. 330).

Khoury-Machool examined the Internet use among the Palestinian youth. In his research the author analyzed the use of the Internet among pupils and students, as well as the online community of professors with students, especially with those who, due to an unfavorable situation, were not able to achieve direct communication. The author concluded that the Internet use is not only a techonolgical benefit, but also a cultural and social phenomenon, emphasizing the importance of access to the Internet, which in countries that do not encounter such difficulties is something that is implied (Khoury-Machool, 2007).

3. Research Methods

Developing countries such as Serbia, together make an interesting research field, especially in areas involving development and the use of new technologies. As a country which not so long ago had only state media, Serbia can still be classified as a country where citizens are in the period of adjusting to new freedoms in the field of communication and information. The expansion of the use of the Internet has certainly opened a new space for civic action. However, the question remains to what extent citizens in Serbia can and want to use this new, supposedly democratized space. Based on these findings and theoretical explanations, the following Research Question and Hypotheses are given:

Research Question: In what way does the use of the Internet reflect on activism in the offline world?
Hypothesis: The use of the Internet has been in positive correlation with activism in the offline world.

The quantitative method was applied in the research paper and the results were obtained by means of a questionnaire. The web-based survey, was designed in such a way to give the answer to the presented hypothesis. The questionnaire was created by means of Google account and then shared on social networks. It was active for a week, starting on July 17th and ending on July 24th, 2017. During that time, 254 respondents answered the questions such as: *have you ever participated in an activity which was primarily launched on the internet; have you ever organized protest or humanitarian action online; have you ever signed an online petition, etc.*

Web surveys often encounter criticism for their inability to obtain a representative sample and difficulty in controlling multiple responses. However, this method is justified since the target group is comprised of active Internet users, as is the case in this paper. At this moment, we want to emphasize that the results obtained from our survey do not tend to be applicable to the entire population of Internet users in Serbia. Moreover, they are valid only for the tested sample and serve as a starting point for further discussion and interpretation.

4. Results

The results obtained from the questionnaire confirm the author's starting hypothesis. The active users of the Internet were the target audience and all the respondents have been using the Internet on a daily basis, which is an important factor in the interpretation of the results. The respondents have been using the Internet mostly for information (89%), somewhat less for entertainment (73.2%) and equally for education and work (63.8%). Considering the fact that these online petitions, as a form of civic activism, have gained popularity in recent years, one of the questions concerned the participation in online petitions. More than a half of the respondents signed petitions multiple times (64%), 23% signed the online petition once, while 13% of the respondents have never participated in this type of an online activity.

Chart 1: *Signing online petitions*

Those who signed an online petition

13%
23%
64%

■ Multiple times ■ Once ■ Never
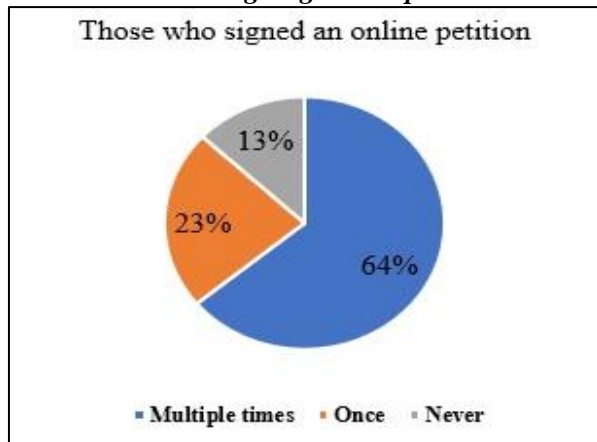
Whether the citizens participating in online activities indeed take action in the real world is the central question in the research. Significant majority of respondents (72%) participated multiple times in an activity, which was primarily launched on the Internet (an event, protest, humanitarian action), 9% participated once, while 19% of the total number of respondents have never participated in an online launched action. Under an online launched action is implied an action on the Internet, but with a direct reflection onto the offline world. In other words, online decisions are made about an activity that will be conducted in the real world. There are also online actions that only relate to online activities, but they were not the subject of the research, since the goal is to indicate the connection between online activism and successful offline actions.

Chart 2: *Online activities*

The participant in an activity launched
on the Internet

19%
9%
72%

■ Multiple times ■ Once ■ Never
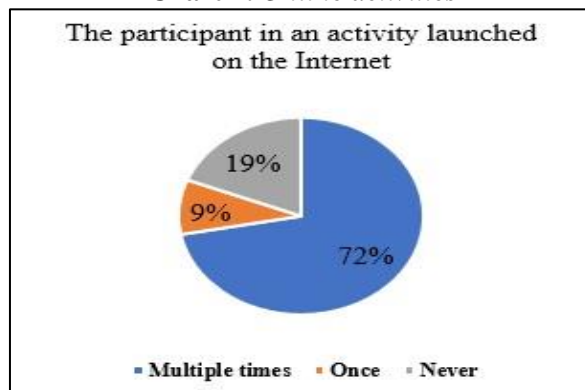
When it comes to the organization of such actions, the situation is somewhat different. Under the organizer or the initiator of an online action in this survey was implied the direct launch of an online petition, humanitarian action or any other event; that the person who is the initiator is also the "zero person", the one who creates the group, the one from whom the action starts and continues its expansion on the web. Only 30% of the respondents were the initiators of an online action, while 70% were not.

However, it was expected that the number of organizers is considerably lower than the number of participants, which in the case with our respondents, even makes a significant percentage.

Chart 3: *Initiating online activities*
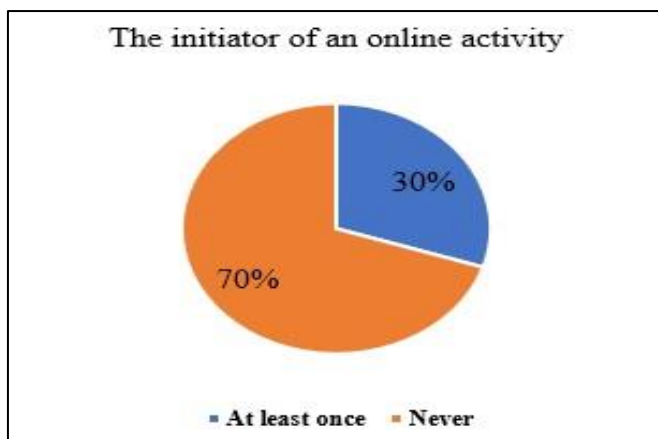
Considering the respondents' attitudes on the success of online actions, almost 90% of them think that actions launched on the Internet can become successful in the offline world, while 85% of them think the Internet is a good way of including people, who would not otherwise become part of events launched only through offline activities. The respondents confirm that the Internet is an excellent way of reaching a great number of people and motivating them to become part of offline activities. The controlling question confirms the previous results, as 88% of the respondents believe that using the Internet can positively influence the activism in the offline world. Also, our respondents confirmed the same thing. If we cross the data of their everyday use of the Internet and the high percentage of participation in online activities, which have further transferred onto the offline activities and become successful, we indeed confirm the hypothesis about the connection between the Internet use and offline activism.

5. Discussion

The space provided by the Internet is undoubtedly suitable for organization and the virtual gathering of a large number of people, which is particularly emphasized in situations when citizens gather around the same idea, similar interests, such as organizing events, whether political or concerning entertainment, organizing protests, humanitarian actions, signing petitions, etc. The virtual space, free of physical boundaries, is entirely convenient for such forms of association.

However, the question causing the greatest dilemma is whether activism remains on the Internet. Do we think that typing on the keyboard is a sufficient effort? Does it free us from the oppression, but at the same time, exhausts for the real-world action offline? Based on the examples from the studies, mentioned in the introduction, we have seen that online actions can have different implications offline. Certainly, it can cause the so-called exhaustion and the absence of a subsequent action.

Nevertheless, online accumulation, especially the state of dissatisfaction, may have real consequences on the events offline. Numerous already mentioned studies were mainly focused on a certain type of activism, while our studies focused on activism in general. Our goal demanded an answer to the question whether the Internet activism, in any form, can have a consequence on a real course of events. The focus of our research had, therefore, been significantly extended. Also, we did not deal with individual cases of activism, but we received the expected answers to the general research question: In what way does the activism on the Internet influence the offline activism? Based on the results, we come to a conclusion that the correlation is positive. The everyday users of the Internet in Serbia, making 100% of our sample, often participate in online actions, whether they are of political, humanitarian or any other character. In addition, they happen to be the initiators of such actions themselves. Their activities begin on the Internet but do not end in the virtual world. They mostly participate in both actions launched online and in the real world. They participate in citizen protests on the streets, in humanitarian actions, their online petitions change real circumstances in the offline world. In their opinion, online activism correlates positively with offline activism.

The respondents believe in the power of activism launched online and confirm our starting hypothesis. The space obtained by the expansion of the "network" has been incomprehensible, both physically and by the number of its possibilities. The way we will choose to use it depends on the intentions and the will of the citizens. Although some activities begin to live and die on the Internet, it is overly optimistic to believe in the unlimited power of such activities. Nonetheless, we believe that the wave of the Internet activism, although launched in recent years, is still developing and we will discuss its consequences in years to come. According to Baringhorst, the Internet is more

the medium of communication and coordination than the medium that can replace civil resistance. Also, the author states that it is hard to expect offline activities to be completely replaced by online engagement, and the best concept is the mutual complementarity of these two forms of engagements (Baringhorst, 2011, p. 337). In any event, we believe that in recent years the wave of internet activism has been in an early stage of development and its consequences will be discussed in years to come.

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