The Challenge of Increasing Civic Engagement in the Digital Age

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"The genius of democracies is seen not only in the great number of new words introduced but even more in the new ideas they express."—Alexis de Tocqueville[1]

1. ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA 478 (George Lawrence trans., HarperCollins 2000) (1835).

I. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become the new platform for freedom of speech and the expression of civic ideas. With more than seventy percent of Americans online, virtual micro-communities, or niche web portals, have made it easier for people to deliberately seek out and sustain relationships with those that share similar interests, opinions, and backgrounds.[2] Citizens can pick and choose both the online destination where they want to share and the preferred format to communicate their opinions, whether through a blog, video, podcast, or tweet. Before the Internet, these ideas were shared at community town hall and block club meetings. People came together physically to mobilize around issues and to develop strategies for collective action. The civil rights movement of the 1960s is one such example. Civil rights leaders often planned activities in church basements, ultimately leading to well-orchestrated protests against legalized racism. These demonstrations culminated in a series of laws banning discrimination in public accommodations, public facilities, public education, federally assisted programs, employment, and voting.[3]

Most recently, the 2008 presidential election demonstrated how the Internet could drive public opinion and voter participation. President Barack Obama's campaign used online tools and social networks in a way that contributed to his victory as the first African American president of the United States. The Obama campaign used the Internet to raise half a billion dollars, the largest amount of contributions to a political operation ever received through online donations.[4] His website, MyBarackObama.com, gathered thousands of e-mail addresses, and, in turn, nurtured a vast base of national volunteers supporting the campaign's field tactics. Young supporters of President Obama, especially those under the age of thirty, used social networking sites to inspire their peers to vote, resulting in more than twenty million young people participating in the 2008 election, an increase of 3.4 million compared to 2004.[5]

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2. *See* John B. Horrigan, *Broadband Adoption and Use in America* 3 (FCC, Omnibus Broadband Initiative, Working Paper Series No. 1, 2010), http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-296442A1.pdf; JON P. GANT ET AL., JOINT CTR. FOR POLITICAL & ECON. STUDIES, NATIONAL MINORITY BROADBAND ADOPTION: COMPARATIVE TRENDS IN ADOPTION, ACCEPTANCE AND USE 1 (Feb. 2010), http://www.jointcenter.org/publications1/publication-PDFs/MTI_BROADBAND_REPORT_2.pdf.

3. *See generally* Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. §§ 1981–2000(f) (2006).

4. *Summary Data for Barack Obama*, OPENSECRETS.ORG, http://www.opensecrets.org/pres08/summary.php?id=n00009638 (last visited Nov. 15, 2010); Mitch Wagner, *Obama Election Ushering in First Internet Presidency*, INFORMATIONWEEK.COM (Nov. 5, 2008), http://www.informationweek.com/news/government/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=21200081.

5. Ctr. for Info. & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, *Youth Turnout Rate Rises to at Least 52%*, CIVICYOUTH.ORG (Nov. 7, 2008), http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=323.

Today, Internet use continues to increase. As previously stated, more than seventy percent of Americans are online, and use of social networking sites has tripled.[6] College-educated, affluent minorities that were previously the slowest to use the web are now more prevalent users.[7] In many ways, this surge in online activity makes it possible for people to organize and unite in more powerful ways and voice opinions on predominant issues. Yet, disparities in digital access, especially among the less educated and poor, further contribute to the further alienation and possible disenfranchisement of these groups. Moreover, the affinity of individuals toward these online, niche-based communities can potentially inhibit broad coalition building, an essential aspect of American democracy.

While the example of the 2008 presidential election foreshadows the role of the Internet in our democracy, addressing the factors that create and maintain stratification on the web is the main focus of this Essay. I argue that unequal access to the Internet affects civic engagement when groups are underrepresented or on the periphery of online activity. Moreover, political deliberation among a diverse group of citizens is limited when individuals cluster themselves on the web within communities that essentially mirror their offline networks and experiences. In this Essay, I offer policymakers and other civic leaders interested in creating a just and inclusive democracy a series of strategies for transforming the Internet into a place for deliberative exchange that impacts future public policies, promotes digital inclusion, and restructures online platforms to more effectively broker relationships between diverse people and causes.

This Essay will first explore the tension between traditional and online civic engagement and underscore how the Internet is shaping how public opinion gets exchanged and acted on. Next, I will delve into disparities in digital access and how these restrict the less educated, able, and affluent from contributing to public discourse. Finally, I will offer a series of strategies for policymakers to ensure the Internet becomes a space for more robust civic engagement by drawing attention to its structure, experience, and role in the future of American democracy.

II. THE NEED FOR A NEW FRAMEWORK

The concepts of democracy and civic engagement have long interest-

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6. *Social Networking and Blog Sites Capture More Internet Time and Advertising*, NIELSENWIRE (Sep. 24, 2009), http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/social-networking-and-blog-sites-capture-more-internet-time-and-advertisinga/. *See also* Scott Keeter, Juliana Horowitz & Alec Tyson, *Young Voters in the 2008 Election*, PEW RESEARCH CENTER PUBLICATIONS (Nov. 12, 2008), http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1031/young-voters-in-the-2008-election.

7. *See* GANT ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 1.

ed scholars exploring how citizens engage in civic and political processes.[8] Since 1835, when De Tocqueville outlined the challenges facing American democracy,[9] researchers have investigated civic participation and its impact on individual and collective action. Recent scholars, however, have argued that civic engagement has been steadily declining in our nation since the mid-1960s. Robert Putnam concluded that eroding family structures due to two-career households, suburbanization and urban sprawl, increasing television consumption, and generational shifts all led to waning participation in community life.[10] For Putnam, these factors negatively impact the growth of social capital, that which brings citizens together to resolve collective problems.

Other scholars echo Putnam's beliefs and perceive the Internet as the next medium to hamper the gains of democracy. Frank Rusciano pointed to a degradation in social capital, especially as the Internet prompts people to lose sight of their ability to share and form physical relationships with one another.[11] Thus, the more people are online, the less likely they are engaged in traditional, physical spaces that promote intimacy—whether at a parent-teacher association meeting or a baseball game.

Sociologist Barry Wellman took another approach to understanding the Internet as help or hindrance to civic engagement. Sharing a concept called "networked individualism," Wellman argues that new technologies are shifting the core of communities from physically fixed and bounded groups to social networks.[12] For Wellman, the Internet has not necessarily contributed to social isolation, but has created new forms of social interaction that cannot be measured against standard indicators of social capital. New online collaboration tools, such as blogs, podcasts, and wikis, may lead to the revitalization of American democracy, as more people are participating and contributing to current public discourse.

To Wellman's point, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and Meetup are becoming the new vanguards for public engagement as they build communities of similar interests and galvanize people around common causes.[13] Becoming the preferred destination for

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8. *See generally* CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY (Theda Skocpol & Morris P. Fiorina eds., 1999).

9. *See generally* DE TOCQUEVILLE, *supra* note 1.

10. *See generally* ROBERT D. PUTNAM, BOWLING ALONE: THE COLLAPSE AND REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY (2000).

11. *See* Frank Louis Rusciano, *"Surfing Alone": Internet Communities, Public Opinion, and Civic Participation*, PUBLICOPINIONPROS.NORC.ORG (Apr. 2005), http://www.publicopinionpros.norc.org/features/2005/apr/rusciano.asp.

12. *See* Barry Wellman, *Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking*, 25.2 INT'L J. URBAN & REG. RES. 227, 228, 231, 247–48 (2001).

13. For example, since Facebook introduced *Causes* to over 175 million Facebook users in 2007, *Causes* has been the leader in getting individuals aligned with the missions of vari-

many, social networking websites are reengineering how individuals share, discuss, and exchange ideas, as well as forge connections based on similar interests, tastes, and even friends. In 2009, research from the Pew Internet and American Life Project concluded that "46% of online American adults 18 and older use a social networking site like MySpace, Facebook or LinkedIn, up from 8% in February 2005."[14] Although younger people are more likely to use social networking, over the past few years, older Americans are flocking to social networking sites and quickly becoming the fastest growing group of social network users.[15]

The earthquake in Haiti is a recent example of new media's influence on civic engagement. When news of the tragedy hit, millions of Internet users donated money toward disaster relief efforts through websites and text-messaging campaigns. These numbers were expanded by thousands of empathetic Internet users who also reached out to their social networks to forge volunteer efforts and find emergency items for Haiti's affected citizens.[16]

These dynamic online tools are also being used by government at all levels to increase citizen feedback and participation. The Benton Foundation's publication, *Using Technology and Innovation to Address Our Nation's Critical Challenges,* stated that the Internet has "tremendous opportunity to reenergize government, making it more efficient, transparent, accountable, and open to the active participation of the citizens it serves, while generating cost savings in the billions of dollars."[17] Government use of web 2.0 and 3.0 applications further promotes efficiency when citizens are able to point out waste, fraud, and abuse.

The bipartisan Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006—cosponsored by then-Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain and which resulted in the launching of *USASpending.gov* in December

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ous organizations.

14. Amanda Lenhart, *The Democratization of Online Social Networks*, PEWINTERNET (Oct. 8, 2009), http://pewinternet.org/Presentations/2009/41--The-Democratization-of-Online-Social-Networks.aspx.

15. *See* MARY MADDEN, OLDER ADULTS AND SOCIAL MEDIA 2 (Aug. 27, 2010), http://pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2010/Pew%20Internet%20-%20Older%20Adults%20and%20Social%20Media.pdf.

16. *See, e.g.*, Anita Hamilton, Donating by Text: Haiti Fundraising Goes Viral, TIME, Jan. 13, 2010, *available at* http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1953528,00.html; M.G. Siegler, Text Message Donations to Haiti Cross $10 Million; Companies Commit Immediate Funds, TECHCRUNCH (Jan. 15, 2010), http://techcrunch.com/2010/01/15/haiti-text-donations/; $2 Million in Donations for Haiti, via Text Message, BITS (Jan. 13, 2010, 6:38 PM), http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/13/1-million-in-donations-for-haiti-via-text-message/.

17. JONATHON RINTELS, THE BENTON FOUNDATION, AN ACTION PLAN FOR AMERICA: USING TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION TO ADDRESS OUR NATION'S CRITICAL CHALLENGES 34 (2008), http://www.benton.org/sites/benton.org/files/Benton_Foundation_Action_Plan.pdf.

2007—is an example of government's promotion of the Internet for civic engagement.[18] President Obama's December 2009 *Open Government Directive* demonstrates the federal government's commitment to innovation and civic participation.[19] The FCC's use of online social networking sites and new media tools, such as YouTube, Second Life, Twitter, and Facebook, connected some 335,000 citizens to public workshops and online public feedback forums in the development of the *National Broadband Plan*.[20] The final report reflected not only the formal written input of tens of thousands of commentators, but also of the many thousands of other citizens who submitted comments to the FCC broadband blog, edited portions of draft text via IdeaScale, and submitted questions and comments during webcasted public hearings and workshops.

These examples of how the Internet is increasing civic engagement are promising, especially as people become more dispersed and diverse in our nation. Yet the question of whether or not these online exchanges can inspire collective action and generate social change remains unanswered. Historic social movements that fought for civil and women's rights were highly dependent on robust exchanges and tactics to formulate their call to action. From college students to church pastors to seasoned community organizers, the people that were a part of these movements knocked on doors, made telephone calls, and participated in nonviolent protests to draw attention to their issues. Participants in these movements were highly diverse in their racial and ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, values, and interests. While their upbringing might have differed, their overarching belief in the power of democracy led to insurgency among these groups.

Can the Internet replicate this level of diversity and influence political activism? Will broad coalitions of people emerge from an online space that is still primarily controlled by one's affinity towards one social network over the other? Getting together with others to discuss issues of public concern on the web is just one form of collective action. And in agreement with Putnam, there is probably no substitute for the intimacy that forms when individuals are physically drawn together. However, even behind the

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18. Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006, Pub. L. No. 109-282, 120 Stat. 1186; *see also* RINTELS, *supra* note 17, at 34 (noting that information about federal grants, contracts, loans, and other financial information is available to the general public on USASpending.gov).

19. *See generally* Memorandum from Peter R. Orszag on Open Government Directive (Dec. 8, 2009), http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/memoranda_2010/m10-06.pdf.

20. Aaron M. Cohen, *Social Networking and Open Government: U.S. Agency Harnesses the Internet to Address Broadband's Infrastructure Challenge*, FUTURIST (July 1, 2010), http://www.allbusiness.com/technology/software-services-applications-internet/14683371-1.html.

isolation of one's computer, the sophistication of the Internet in bringing people closer to public issues can possibly convert naysayers into supporters of emerging social movements.

The Internet presents an opportunity to extend the reach of our democracy and heighten the mobilization of citizens around issues of importance. To get there, however, issues related to disparities in digital access and social networks need to be addressed. The next section discusses these challenges in more detail.

III. DISPARITIES IN DIGITAL ACCESS

Despite an increase in national broadband adoption, many people remain offline. A recent report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that among the 100 million Americans who do not have broadband at home, there are significant demographic differences based on age, gender, education, level of Internet experience, and income that potentially influence their acceptance and use of the Internet.[21] While more African Americans and Hispanics are getting online, those getting online tend to be more affluent and better educated.[22] Recent data released by the FCC and the U.S. Department of Commerce affirm this trend. According to the recent FCC Working Paper on broadband adoption and use, fifty-nine percent of African Americans have broadband connections at home,[23] reflecting a considerable increase from the forty-six percent who had adopted broadband at home in 2009.[24]

Unfortunately, those Americans who stand to gain the most from the Internet are unable to use it to break the trajectories of social isolation, poverty, and illiteracy. Seniors, low-income people, people with disabilities, and the less-educated segments of the American population who are wrought with economic and social hardship are largely not reaping the benefits of digital access. Table 1 illustrates some of these disparities.

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21. GANT ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 2.

22. *Id.* at 13.

23. Horrigan, *supra* note 2, at 3.

24. JOHN HORRIGAN, PEW INTERNET & AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT, HOME BROADBAND ADOPTION 2009: BROADBAND ADOPTION INCREASES, BUT MONTHLY PRICES DO TOO 4 (June 2009), http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/10-Home-Broadband-Adoption-2009.aspx.

Table 1: Broadband Adoption by American Adults by Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors

*Hispanics includes both English and Spanish speaking Hispanics
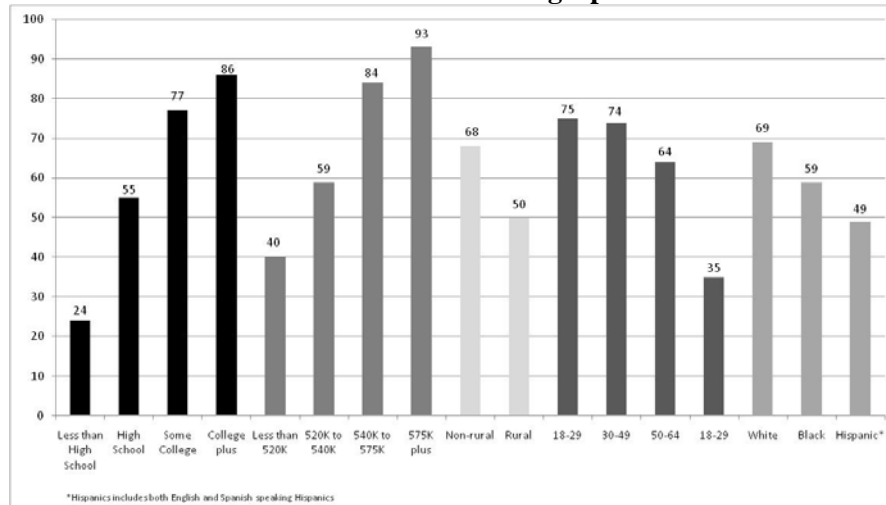
Only twenty-four percent of people with less than a high school education and forty percent of households with incomes under $20,000 are likely to adopt broadband in America.[25] While differences in Internet access have slowly narrowed between whites, blacks, and Hispanics, income and educational attainment still define who benefits. The glaring statistics generated by a 2010 report published by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies indicated that low-income high school dropouts were three times less likely to have a residential broadband connection than were more affluent and educated individuals.[26]

The barriers of affordability, availability, and accessibility tend to be the primary reasons why vulnerable groups are not getting online.

A.   Broadband Affordability

The cost of broadband continues to be a major barrier to broadband adoption by segments of the population. The recent FCC study on broadband adoption and use found that when consumers were asked what they paid for the various telecommunications services (cell phone, landline phone, Internet, cable, TV, satellite, or wireless broadband), overall respondents reported paying $40.68 per month for their broadband Internet connections.[27] Those who shared that they bundled Internet with other ser-

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25. Horrigan, *supra* note 2, at 13.
26. GANT ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 2–3.
27. Horrigan, *supra* note 2, at 3–4.

vices paid on average $37.70, while others with a stand-alone connection reported $46.25 as their monthly bill.[28] The FCC data aligns with research from the April 2009 Pew Internet and American Life Project that reported an average monthly bill of $39 for users.[29] All of these findings clearly suggest that the price of monthly broadband services might serve as a barrier to individuals on a fixed or limited income.

B.   Broadband Availability

The proximity to service also affects an individual's decision to adopt high-speed broadband. People from rural communities or urban markets without a proven-business case for services experience lag in getting connected to high-speed broadband services. Although penetration to underserved communities has been increasing with recent private sector investment and government stimulus programs, the need for ubiquitous access is still a persistent requirement to alleviate digital disparities that exist for vulnerable populations—especially seniors, low-income individuals, rural residents, and people with disabilities. Older minorities, especially those from rural communities, were the least likely to benefit from Internet access as compared to other groups.[30]

C.   Broadband Accessibility

Having the necessary hardware, digital literacy training, and appealing online content also influences who gets online. While many policymakers see the promise of mobile broadband as narrowing digital access, people still require the hardware—whether a PC, smartphone, iPad, or netbook—to successfully navigate the web. While more minorities were likely to own cell phones, low computer ownership rates created additional obstacles to access for poor African Americans and Hispanics.[31] Moreover, individuals need the appropriate online training and experience to have an enriched online experience. Similar to driving a vehicle, novice Internet users require the training to be more effective navigators of the online world. Finally, how people perceive the value of the web is of equal importance. The majority of broadband research clearly indicates that a large proportion of Americans are simply not interested in getting online because of their preconceived notions about its value.[32] Creating relevant, meaningful content for citizens that is multilingual, literacy appropriate, and shared at different ability levels is an important catalyst for increasing online par-

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28. *Id.*

29. HORRIGAN, *supra* note 24, at 5.

30. *See id.* at 13–14.

31. *See* GANT ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 2.

32. *See id.* at 29; Horrigan, *supra* note 2, at 27; HORRIGAN, *supra* note 24, at 41.

ticipation.

Digital inclusion has the greatest potential to benefit the very communities in which it is now lacking. A report issued by University of Minnesota's Institute on Race and Poverty asserts that broadband and the Internet are ultimately about access to employment, human services, and community opportunities. These opportunities improve quality of life by offering better wages, housing, social and health services, quality educational systems, and more.[33] Furthermore, being online allows these vulnerable populations to participate in the current conversations on political issues at their inception before becoming legislation.

Regrettably, civic activity, whether online or offline, tends to correlate with an individual's background. According to a 2009 report on the Internet and civic engagement from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, political activity is highly correlated with one's income and educational attainment.[34] More affluent and educated Internet users also are much more likely to be very politically engaged than those that are not well off.[35] While lack of access to a home broadband connection is a partial explanation for online differences, low-income, less educated people tend not to know what the overall issues are and do not have a means for debating them.[36] When we compare these statistics with the trend in Internet use, those segments of the population that could benefit from public policies aimed at reducing poverty and educational and social inequalities are limited by their lack of digital access. The impact of being alienated from predominant national conversations, therefore, fosters a new type of isolation, especially around the issues that matter most to our nation.

IV. DISPARITIES IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Even with the increased use of online social network sites, there continue to be limitations. Some scholars argue that virtual communities merely mirror offline communities, especially in terms of economic, racial, and educational differences.[37] Thus, the current organization of the Internet's microcommunities might actually stratify the web and deepen the inequali-

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33. INST. ON RACE & POVERTY, DIGITAL JUSTICE: PROGRESS TOWARDS DIGITAL INCLUSION IN MINNESOTA 2 (2006), http://www.irpumn.org/website/projects/index.php?strWebAction=project_detail&intProjectID=12.

34. AARON SMITH ET AL., PEW INTERNET & AM. LIFE PROJECT, THE INTERNET AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT 36 (2009), http://pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2009/The%20Internet%20and%20Civic%20Engagement.pdf.

35. *Id.* at 3.

36. *Id.* at 38.

37. *See, e.g.*, Eszter Hargittai, *Whose Space? Differences Among Users and Non-Users of Social Network Sites*, 13 J. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMM. 276, 277–78 (2007); Nicole B. Ellison et al., *The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites*, 12 J. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMM. 1143, 1144 (2007).

ties that the nation seeks to narrow. Eszter Hargittai found, in her 2007 study about differences between social networking sites, that one's existing offline network not only serves to influence one's choice of social networks, but also places barriers to entry into new networks, especially when one's upbringing, race, or residence is identified.[38] In her evaluation of how college students used six popular social networking sites, she concluded that individuals were more likely to migrate to social networking sites with students from similar backgrounds because of the comfort of being around others like them.[39]

Researcher danah boyd, who studies how young people use the web, offered a similar theory by highlighting age, class, and race differences that surface between Facebook and MySpace teen users. boyd argues that Facebook teens tend to be the "good kids" who come from families where education and higher education are valued.[40] These young users are also "primarily white, but not exclusively. They are in honors classes, looking forward to the prom, and live in a world dictated by after school activities."[41]

In comparison, members of the popular MySpace social network—predominantly dominated by entertainment content—are Latino, immigrant, "gangstas," and alternative kids that do not align with status quo expectations.

According to boyd's research, "[t]hese are kids whose parents didn't go to college, who are expected to get a job when they finish high school[] [and] . . . plan to go into the military immediately after school[]."[42]

While the research in this area is evolving and more analysis needs to be undertaken, the clustering of people into online niche-based communities, even if subtle, is manifesting in social media. And many Internet users are leaning toward microcommunities that reflect their personal and professional experiences. While these locales have their place in our virtual social identities, more online applications and tools—especially those created through public-private partnerships—should facilitate broader exchanges between groups. These groups, in turn, influence more Internet users to embrace a range of opinions, needs, values, perspectives, and backgrounds that ultimately nurture more equitable solutions to public concerns.[43]

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38. *See generally* Hargittai, *supra* note 37.

39. *Id.* at 290–91.

40. danah boyd, *Viewing American Class Divisions Through Facebook and MySpace*, DANAH.ORG (June 24, 2007), http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html.

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.*

43. The Obama Administration is currently promoting information transparency and collaboration through its Open Government initiative. The assumption in this Essay, however, is that more needs to be done to advance connections to make collaboration much more engaging.

V. THE FUTURE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Tapping into the potential of citizens is becoming increasingly important in our society. In the *National Broadband Plan*, the FCC identified civic engagement as one of many core issues that needs to be powered by the expansion of broadband. In the *Plan*'s summary, the FCC states that "[b]roadband can inform our communities and increase the level of citizen participation to strengthen local communities and the fabric of America's democracy. It can also expand opportunities to weave citizen-based innovation and collaboration into our government."[44] Stating that civic engagement is the "lifeblood" of our democracy and the "bedrock" of its legitimacy, the *National Broadband Plan* offers concise recommendations that bring people closer to government, and government information and tools closer to the government's constituents. Broadband is perceived as enhancing democratic participation, particularly as it seeks to inform and advise the public and extend the reach of information about the governing process.

The rapid transition to a digital economy as discussed in this Essay does not come without challenges. In good conscience, policymakers and other civic leaders must seek out solutions that ensure a more just and equitable Internet that not only reflects the diversity of our nation but also encourages broad coalitions among different groups of people and their causes. Based upon the findings shared in this Essay, policymakers might consider the following approaches to ensure that citizens are fully represented in the deliberative exchanges that take place on the Internet.

First, policymakers, in partnership with web developers, should consider an Internet that empowers and engages people to institute social change. This might require a different approach to its design, and a new set of implementers to develop more applications and tools that encourage citizens to participate as deeply as those already plugged in. Imagine how people and information could be organized on the web if both hackers and activists worked together to build more progressive applications that fostered alliances around causes and not just people, and enabled opportunities for collective action, not just volunteerism or special interest affiliation. The web definitely has space for more groups like Meetup and MoveOn.org that are inspiring people to make a difference.

These implementers must also create innovative strategies for connecting people with others that fall outside of their familiar social networks, and encourage users to take more risks in building these types of coalitions. While government can influence the growth of these online communities and technology experts can design them, activists whose ex-

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44. *Broadband and Civic Engagement*, BROADBAND.GOV, http://www.broadband.gov/issues/civic-engagement.html (last visited Nov. 15, 2010).

pertise is to organize people must be included on the team of designers leading these types of public-benefit applications.

Second, for Americans to drive the future of our democracy through the Internet, we must seed more online macrocommunities, proportionate to those that are niche-based, to engage broad groups of people from all backgrounds, viewpoints, and interests. These groups must then work on common causes to alleviate domestic and global issues. These macrocommunities must also play a vital role in surfacing issues to key decision makers, not just to others within the same network.

Third, policymakers must accelerate access to high-speed broadband for underrepresented groups. If the online world is becoming the central destination for sharing, exchanging, and formulating opinions on issues that improve the nation, then all people need to be involved in the conversation. Promoting ubiquitous access and broadband adoption for all citizens must be a priority to ensure that a new information divide does not emerge as the next civil rights issue for marginalized groups. Gaining the maximum amount of diversity of background and opinion is also critical to positioning the Internet as the future of civic engagement. When the Internet simply mirrors the status quo, public issues and policies will only reflect the experiences of those introducing and debating them. Finding ways to attract more people to the web through programs that address the critical barriers to adoption, like a reformed Universal Service Fund (USF) to address cost barriers and hardware challenges, or incentives to the public and private sectors for the creation of public purpose content and applications, will lead to a more diverse online community and fuel richer political deliberations.

Fourth, it goes without saying that the value of relationships is still critical in a democracy. How we relate to one another both online and offline is at the core of civic engagement. When a person goes into a store, he or she forms a relationship with the sales associate. When a child goes to school, he or she develops a connection with the teacher. Though potent in form, the Internet cannot replace these offline experiences that govern how we interact in our society and the emotional attachment often associated with our relationships.

An example of personal interaction is when President Obama's campaign leveraged the Internet to contribute to his victory. The Obama campaign married digital tools with traditional forms of community organizing. Where people from the same community might have found each other on his website, they organized meetings at each other's homes or in community centers to advocate on behalf of his positions. Obama supporters used the web to identify districts where more door knocking needed to occur, and campaign e-mails were designed to bring more people into their movement. Traditional forms of community organizing and civic engage-

ment will not disappear with the increase in online activity; instead, the web will surface new strategies for expanding civic and political participation.

The De Tocqueville quote at the beginning of this Essay is indicative of where the Internet is currently headed: a place for words that may never aggregate the depth of ideas and people needed to improve our democracy. The sentiment of this Essay is simple. As the Internet becomes a predominant force in driving civic engagement and digital communications, policymakers and other civic leaders must also ensure that it strives toward a more inclusive forum for communication, debate, and insight into public issues that improve the state of the nation. Moving forward, this will require more substantive research in this area, and a national emphasis on aligning people and systems in ways that create significant social change.