

Young adults struggle with online political participation

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Young adults who are web savvy, but lack knowledge about federal government, may struggle to use the web for political participation, according to a team of researchers.

"There's a misconception that young adults are naturally skilled at all computer techniques," said Jens Grossklags, assistant professor of information sciences and technology, Penn State. "And while they might be comfortable on some sites and social networks, that doesn't necessarily mean that young adults know how to use the Internet for political participation."

In an experiment, the researchers provided 12 university students with two scenarios that required them to send two personal comments to two different federal government agencies. For example, one scenario asked participants to tell the agency that they favored stricter prescription drug regulations. Another scenario required participants to express their opinion on [health care reform](#). Researchers did not provide the participants with the name or acronym of the government agency they were actually targeting.

In evaluating the students' success, the researchers found that only half of them were able to search successfully for the correct web site. For the prescription drug scenario, only three participants found the Federal Drug Administration. One person found the [Federal Aviation Administration](#) in the scenario on airport safety, and one person correctly navigated to the Environmental Protection Agency in response

to a scenario about environmental efforts. In the health care reform scenario, only one person found the White House website, and another participant navigated to the White House's [Facebook](#) page.

Grossklags, who worked with Lora Appel and Frank Bridges, both graduate students in communication and information, Rutgers University, said that several obstacles kept the students from reaching the correct online destination.

A general lack of knowledge of how federal government works and how it is structured limited the participants' ability to search for government websites, Grossklags told attendees this month at the 12th International Digital Government Research Conference, College Park, Md.

Grossklags said that another problem is that participants rarely changed their initial search queries to find better results. For example, in the FAA scenario, one participant started with a generic search phrase, "opinions to U.S. government," and failed to create a more specific search after the initial query failed.

Finally, [federal government](#) websites and social networks rarely showed up in the top listings of search engines. Commercial websites tended to capture those top spots in search listings, and the participants rarely searched below those top listings.

The researchers indicated that although government agencies have increased the amount of information on the Internet, the sites were not designed to promote interactivity.

Government officials seem to design websites that disseminate information, rather than collect input, Grossklags said.

"For example, there is a contact button on the White House site,"

Grossklags said. "But, there's no indication whether this is a way to submit your opinion on an issue, or whether it's just a place to make comments about the website."

Some students indicated that social networks may encourage political participation. As one participant in the experiment commented, "Facebook is a lot more useful, I never would have guessed to access the government through Facebook."

Grossklags said that social networks may appeal to some [young adults](#), but officials must match the correct online tools with the correct online tasks.

"I think that some users would prefer a more effective presence of [government](#) agencies and officials on [social networking](#) sites," said Grossklags. "However, these sites were not built for this task, and other customized solutions would probably yield a more significant return."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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