

# High-speed internet led to a decline in civic and political engagement, research shows

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The likelihood of people participating in community work declined as high-speed internet was rolled out in the UK, research shows.

Academics at Cardiff University (Tommaso Reggiani)—in cooperation with researchers at KU Leuven (Mattia Nardotto), European Commission Joint Research Centre (Andrea Geraci), and Sapienza University of Rome (Fabio Sabatini)—used an articulated set of data to compare the behavior of households before and after the distribution of [broadband](#) in their area.

Their analysis, which covers 1997 to 2017, shows that being 1.8 km closer to a local exchange, and therefore having a higher connection speed, caused an overall decrease in the likelihood of participation in civic organizations by 4.7 percent.

For volunteering associations, the likelihood of people participating in these organizations reduced by 10.3 percent.

For political parties, broadband availability reduced the likelihood of participation by 19 percent.

Calculations, based on the population's distribution around the hubs of the broadband network, suggest that proximity to a local exchange shifted the social participation of approximately 450,000 residents.

Dr. Tommaso Reggiani, a lecturer in economics at Cardiff Business School said: "Overall, our results suggest that [broadband internet](#) displaced the time-consuming activities oriented to pursuing the common good. The effect is statistically significant and sizable.

"This is a different picture to what we saw in Germany during this period. In the years of fast internet take-up there, the country reported higher levels of voluntary work for cultural, sport, or hobby associations, participation and unpaid work for [political parties](#), and membership in humanitarian organizations.

"In the UK—considering the descriptive statistics—people were significantly more likely to consider the [internet](#) as a tool for e-shopping, online gaming, and other forms of private entertainment."

In contrast to the [negative effect](#) on community activities, they found broadband had no significant impact on cultural consumption and respondents' relationships with friends.

Dr. Reggiani added: "We need further research and more specific data on the activities that people perform online to better understand how the societal impact of the fast Internet in light of the growing role of the few social media platforms that monopolize the online discourse, such as Twitter and Facebook."

The paper, "Broadband Internet and social capital," is published in the *Journal of Public Economics*.

**More information:** Andrea Geraci et al, Broadband Internet and social capital, *Journal of Public Economics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2021.104578](#)

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