



# Simply slacktivism?

*Internet participation in Finland*

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**Abstract:** *Following initial euphoria over the democratizing potential of the Internet, sceptical voices have contended that the impact of the Internet on the state of democracy may be less benign. A central critique claims that political participation on the internet is nothing more than slacktivism, i.e. activities that enhance the feel-good factor of the participants but have no impact on real life political outcomes. This study examines three accusations of slacktivism levelled against online participants: that they are detached from formal politics and therefore do not aim to influence political outcomes, that they choose easily accessible digital forms of engagement over more effective traditional activities, and that they lack central political competences necessary to comprehend the functioning of the political system. The results suggest that there is little reason to be worried over any negative impact of the Internet on political engagement since the virtual participants are both active and competent citizens. In this sense, the accusation of slacktivism against political participation via the Internet appears to be misguided.*

**Keywords:** Slacktivism, Internet, Political Participation, Democracy, E-democracy

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In recent years, the impact of the Internet on democracy has become a debated topic. A number of scholars have warned that the initial euphoria over the beneficial impact of the Internet (e.g. Barber, 1998) was exaggerated and that the Internet may in fact have negative consequences for democracy (Hindman, 2009; Morozov, 2009, 2011; Norris, 2001; Putnam, 2000) Hence, the impact of the Internet on the state of democracy is far from self-evident at this stage.

When it comes to civic engagement on the Internet, it has been claimed that rather than genuine political involvement, digital activism constitutes nothing more than *slacktivism* since the activities only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants (Morozov, 2009; cf. Christensen, 2011a). Some fear that traditional, more effective, forms of involvement are crowded out by digital forms of involvement that are unable to

achieve political goals (Putnam, 2000). Were this to be true, it could well imply that the implications of Internet activism would be less benign than what is frequently contended.

However, little empirical research has examined the accusation of slacktivism. This study helps change this situation by examining three central allegations raised against citizens using the Internet for political purposes:

1. The Internet participants are detached from the formal political sphere and espouse negative judgements on the functioning of the political system.
2. The Internet participants are citizens who do not engage in offline political activities.
3. The Internet participants lack central political competences who do not know how to influence political decisions effectively.

This study examines these claims in Finland since the Finnish National Electoral Study from the most recent elections in 2011 makes it possible to examine these questions given that it contains appropriate indicators on all relevant factors (Borg and Grönlund, 2011).

The first section presents the arguments dismissing Internet activism as merely slacktivism. Following this, a methodological section outlines how these accusations are examined in this study. The third section is the empirical examination of the three allegations, before summing up and discussing the results in the final section. The results suggest that the Internet participants are generally capable citizens who are also otherwise engaged in civic issues. Hence, the accusation of Internet activism being merely slacktivism seems largely misguided.

## 1. Internet engagement and the accusation of slacktivism

The Internet has become an important venue for political activities and the implications of this for democracy has become a debated topic (Norris, 2001; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Loader and Mercea, 2012). It has been contended that the Internet may have a profound impact on how and why citizens become active by offering new ways to become politically active (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). These activities involve electronic versions of traditional forms of participation, such as online petition signing or contacting via email (Shulman, 2009) or new forms of cyber involvement such as politically motivated hackings (Jordan and Taylor, 2004). The Internet may also boost offline participation by making it easier to coordinate activities and disseminate information on events to a broader public (Ayres, 1999; Bennett, et al., 2008). For these reasons, many initially saw the Internet as a potential saviour of the established democracies and their representative systems of government suffering from a lack of citizen involvement (Pharr and Putnam, 2000). The most optimistic scholars expected the Internet to change the functioning of democracy profoundly by increasing mass participation (Barber, 1998).

Other scholars are more cautious and even negative when it comes to the impact of the Internet on the state of democracy (Norris, 2001; Hindman, 2009; Morozov, 2009, 2011). Some scholars dismiss the value of Internet activities for political participation altogether since the Internet does not engage citizens in meaningful political matters, but only help them to fulfil their personal aspirations. For this reason, they do not see the relevance of the Internet for political participation properly defined (cf. Putnam, 2000, 179). However, more recent contributions to the literature dismiss the sharp distinction between private

and public matters since this is often unattainable in practice (cf. Papacharissi, 2010). In line with this, and as is customary in recent work on the subject (cf. Micheletti and McFarland, 2011), no hard distinction is drawn here between civic engagement and political participation. Instead, they are both considered expressions of how citizens express their concerns that are of equal value for democratic engagement.

A more serious critique contends that the Internet merely perpetuates existing power relations into the digital universe, recreating a digital divide (Norris, 2001). In a similar vein, Hindman (2009) contends that rather than broaden political discourse, the Internet mainly empowers the same elites who are controlling other media outlets. To paraphrase Schattschneider (1960), the chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent even in the digital heaven. Another critique is aimed at the supposedly democratizing potential of the Internet and new social media proclaimed in connection to various colour revolutions and the Arab spring. The critics contend that commentators and scholars often overestimate the impact of the Internet and social media in ensuring these revolutions due to their visibility (Morozov, 2011).

However, the central criticism under examination here concerns Internet activism in established democracies and the extent to which virtual engagement benefits the state of democracy in these countries. According to this critique, the Internet is swarming with insincere forms of political engagement rather than being colonized by political elites. Although different derogatory epithets exist, *slacktivism* is frequently used to denote political activities that serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants but have no impact on real-life political outcomes (Christensen, 2011a; Karpf, 2010; Morozov, 2009);<sup>1</sup> Slacktivism is not restricted to activities on the Internet, but it is often connected to it since the Internet enables citizens to participate in relatively easy forms of political participation. Even though the ease of participation may increase the amount of politically motivated activities, it does not necessarily have a positive net impact on the quality of democratic engagement. The accusation of slacktivism takes slightly different forms, but three central allegations can be identified.

The first allegation considers the advent of virtual participation the result of an increasing detachment from the formal political sphere. This critique has also been aimed at other recent additions to the political repertoire of political activists in the established democracies (Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006). These critics contend that Internet activism is driven by disaffection with the formal political system and the actors inhabiting it (Johnson and Kaye, 1998). Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006, p.310) find that the Internet appeals to people who think that governments are not responsive to citizens' concerns. Although they go on to include that being active via the Internet may boost the political efficacy of participants, this perception nonetheless indicates that the Internet is considered a tool for those detached from the formal political sphere. If Internet activism is primarily outbursts of dissatisfaction, these virtual activities are more appropriately

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<sup>1</sup> Karpf (2010) uses the term *clicktivism* to refer to similar activities. His concept is restricted to Internet activities, whereas slacktivism is also sometimes used to refer to other effortless activities such as wearing a bracelet to show support for a cause. Despite this loser connotation, the term slacktivism is used since it seems to be preferred by most authors.

considered symbolic actions rather than genuine attempts to influence political matters. Contrary to this, a line of research finds Internet activity to have positive effects on political attitudes and suggests that the Internet may help diminish political detachment since it empowers those otherwise feeling marginalized (cf. Johnson and Kaye, 2003, p.15-16). Nevertheless, to dismiss Internet activism as slacktivism is frequently supported with evidence that the Internet activists are detached from real politics.

A second critique considers the Internet participation to be the result of unwillingness among Internet activists to put in the efforts required to be genuinely politically involved (Morozov, 2009). According to Morozov (2009), slacktivism is the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation, who no longer bother with demonstrations when the rouse of the Internet is so much more appealing. According to this perspective, Internet participation does not reflect a genuine desire to influence political matters but is a comfortable way of pretending to care. This critique is often associated with the political commentator and author Malcolm Gladwell (2010), who in a column compared Internet participation via social media with the sit-ins organized by the civil rights movement in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. Unsurprisingly, he finds that Internet participation requires much less effort and often aim to receive social acknowledgement and praise rather than achieve political change. Most political activities would obviously compare unfavourably to such rare expressions of civic courage. Nonetheless, this accusation appears to make intuitive sense since many activities on social networks seem to be manifestations of good intentions but rarely reflect genuine commitment. Morozov (2011: 186) makes a similar point when he condemns individuals with only a cursory interest in the issues who comes together to save the world via the Internet. Some fear that the easily available Internet may lead citizens to substitute their traditional offline activities with online versions, which could be devastating for the effectiveness of participation (Putnam, 2000). According to this portrayal, the Internet attracts people who are not genuinely interested or capable of political participation, but more interested in putting up an appearance of interest by the push of a button. The link between offline and online participation has been examined in previous research. Most studies find a weak positive effect of online engagement on offline involvement (Boulianne, 2009; Christensen, 2011a), whereas others studies cast doubt on the effect of the Internet on civic engagement since any independent effect disappears when controlling for other factors such as socio-economic status and psychological involvement in politics (Bimber, 2001, p.61). Although the connections between offline and online participation remain unclear, this line of critique is frequently used to dismiss Internet activism as slacktivism.

Finally, it has been argued that online activism is slacktivism because it is performed by citizens who lack central political competences and therefore are unable to operate purposefully in the political sphere (Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011). The digital citizens may be sincere in their wishes to influence political matters, but their efforts are misguided in the digital maze of the Internet. For example, it has been contended that campaigns on the Internet are incapable of achieving their stated aims (Christensen, 2011a). These activities can be used to express political opinions, but they are without influence on political decisions since the political decision-makers pay little attention to what is going on in the digital sphere. Even if the Internet mobilizes citizens, the activities

are pointless since they are inefficient tools for affecting political decisions (Shulman, 2009). Rheingold (1993, p.295) argues that the technological advances could be luring citizens into attractively packaged substitutes for democratic discourse. According to Keen (2007), the Internet is populated by amateurs who are incapable of holding the politicians accountable in the same manner as the traditional media. This line of critique resembles the argument that the new forms of participation can lead to a de-skilling of political activism, since they mobilize citizens without socio-economic resources such as education (Topf, 1995, p.71). Mobilizing more people is not necessarily a democratic good, since the effectiveness of participation may become lower in the process (Verba, 2003). In a similar vein, the Internet may lower the quality of civic engagement by mobilizing virtual activists without a proper understanding of the political system (Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011). For this reason, it has been contested that Internet activism is slacktivism since it is less competent citizens who take advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet.

Despite the many negative claims from scholars and commentators alike, few empirical studies systematically examine these claims – although bits and pieces are found in previous literature. For this reason, this study examines the accusation of slacktivism raised against Internet participation.

## 2. Research design

The study examines three allegations brought forward by scholars contending the adverse effect of the Internet on civic or political engagement:<sup>2</sup>

1. **Detachment:** Internet participation is slacktivism since the participants are detached from the formal political sphere.
2. **Inactivity:** Internet participation is slacktivism since the participants do not engage in traditional political or civic offline activities.
3. **Competence:** Internet participation is slacktivism since the participants lack basic political competences and therefore do not know how to influence political decisions most effectively.

Although the present study examines participation as a separate form of participation, this is a simplification since the Internet is not a separate sphere of political mobilization cut off from the offline sphere of political activities (Hirzalla et al., 2010). Although some research suggests that online participation is a distinct mode of participation (Oser et al., 2012), this demarcation is often unattainable since online activists are also active in offline activities. However, since the allegations against Internet activism specifically highlights the links between online activities and political behaviour and attitudes, it is necessary to examine how Internet participation is linked to these attitudes and behaviours.

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<sup>2</sup> The headings are admittedly provocative, but they nonetheless capture the spirit of the accusations raised in the heated (mainly non-scholarly) debate on slacktivism.

## 2.1. Data

The data used for this study comes from the most recent round of the Finnish National Electoral Study collected following the 2011 national elections (Borg & Grönlund, 2011). This data make it possible to examine these questions since it contains a wide set of indicators of political participation on the Internet as well as appropriate indicators on other relevant factors. The survey forms part of the international CSES study and includes 1298 respondents. However, the questions on Internet participation were asked in a drop-off questionnaire filled in by 806 participants, and the study is restricted to these respondents.<sup>3</sup>

Finland represents an interesting case when it comes to participation via the Internet, since the new technological possibilities were introduced at a relatively early stage in Finland (Milner, 2002, p. 131-132; 2010, p135). Although these differences have since evened out, the situation in Finland may provide a peek into the future situation in other countries.

The main limitation of this data is that it is cross-sectional, which means that it is not always possible to settle the direction of causality between the dependent and independent variables (Verba et al., 1995, p.276-279). This problem is particularly pertinent for attitudinal variables since participation may affect attitudes and vice versa. The associations give an indication of what characteristics are salient among Internet participants, but panel data is required to settle the direction of causality conclusively. Nonetheless, this deficiency is common in statistical analyses where panel data is rarely available for examining this sort of questions, and it should not detract anything from the validity of the findings since the main interest lies in the characteristics associated with Internet participants.

## 2.2. Variables<sup>4</sup>

An index is constructed to capture the extent of political activities performed on the Internet. This index forms the dependent variable of the subsequent analyses where the extent to which political participation or civic engagement on the Internet is associated with the accusations raised against Internet activism for being slacktivism. The index is a composite index consisting of involvement in six activities on the Internet, where the respondents indicate whether they have performed the activity in question during the last four years (Cronbach's alpha = 0.61). The low value of Cronbach's Alpha could be interpreted as a problem of reliability. However, this is a normal problem when it comes to indexes of political participation (See Christensen, 2011b, p99-100). For one, the relatively few numbers of indicators affect the low score (Kopalle and Lehmann, 1997, p.192). In addition, the correlations between the activities are not symmetrical, since some

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<sup>3</sup> 1298 persons were interviewed and 1141 respondents consented to fill in the drop-off questionnaire, of which 806 adequately filled in questionnaires were returned. For more on data collection and access to the data see [www.fsd.uta.fi/en/data/catalogue/FSD2653/meF2653e.html](http://www.fsd.uta.fi/en/data/catalogue/FSD2653/meF2653e.html).

<sup>4</sup> Specific information on coding and descriptive statistics for all variables is found in the appendix.

activities require more effort than others, which also depresses the value of Cronbach's alpha. Finally, Cronbach's Alpha assumes that manifest indicators of the same latent concept should be positively correlated in accordance with the "effect indicator model" where the indicators are dependent on the latent variable (Bollen and Lennox, 1991, p305-307). However, indexes of political participation resemble the "causal indicator model", where the indicators cause the latent variable and therefore issues of correlation are less straightforward. For this reason, the analyses proceed using this index to measure the extent of Internet activism as is customary in research on political participation.

Since the index is not normally distributed, the regression analyses are performed with the help of ordinal logistic regression (Norušis, 2010). The coefficients of these regressions are ordered logit coefficients where the coefficients can be interpreted as the impact each variable has on the dependent variable when it changes from its minimum to its maximum value since all explanatory factors are coded 0-1.

The accusation of detachment is examined by analysing the connection of the dependent variable to four attitudinal variables that have been used in previous work on attitudes towards politics and the effect on political behaviour (Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba et al., 1995; Norris, 2002; Christensen, 2011b). Political interest concerns the level of interest the respondent has in politics (Verba et al., 1995: 345-346). This is measured with a question on extent of political interest with respondents indicating their answer on a four-point scale ranging from very interested to not at all interested. External political efficacy concerns the subjective belief in the responsiveness of the system (Almond and Verba, 1963, p168-169; Asbjørnsen & Vogt 1992). This item is measured by an index composed of answers to four questions concerning the responsiveness of the political system and actors (Cronbach's alpha = 0.60).<sup>5</sup> Satisfaction with democracy concerns how satisfied the respondent is with the way democracy currently functions (Hay, 2007, p30-31). This variable is measured with a single question where respondents indicate their satisfaction with democracy on a four-point scale ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. Finally, political trust concerns the belief in the trustworthiness of central state institutions and actors (Hay, 2007, p33-35). This is measured with an index composed of five question where the respondents on a scale from 0-10 indicate the level of trust they put in the President, the political parties, the national parliament, the government, and politicians (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90).

Inactivity is examined by analysing the relationship of Internet participation to three forms of offline political and civic engagement (Christensen, 2011b). Traditional political participation concerns the extent of involvement in four traditional political activities during the last four years. This is measured with an index that measure whether respondents have performed these activities (Cronbach's alpha = 0.60). The second variable concerns involvement in political consumerism, which has become an important for of civic engagement (Cronbach's alpha = 0.67). Finally, associational involvement is

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<sup>5</sup> Although the value of Cronbach's alpha is low for this item, an exploratory factor analyses suggests that the four items load onto a common component. For this reason, the index includes all four items. Alternative codings do not change the substantive findings.

probed by a question where the respondents indicate the number of associations besides work or professional associations of which they are members.

The final claim of a lack of competence is examined with the help of three variables. One is the educational attainment also considered a control variable, since this may also be considered a proxy for civic competence (Verba et al., 1995). Internal political efficacy, or the subjective political competence of respondents (Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011: 904), is measured with the help of a statement on whether politics seem complicated where the response is given on a four point scale ranging from totally agree to totally disagree. The level of factual political knowledge of the respondents is also used to probe civic competence (Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011: 904). This is measured with the number of correct answers to seven factual questions on political matters.

Four socio-demographic factors are used as control factors: age, gender, education and household income. These factors have been known to influence the propensity for being politically active, also in a Finnish context (Bengtsson and Christensen, 2009; Schattschneider, 1960; Verba et al., 1995). Since they are conceived as control factors, a substantial interpretation of the results for these will not be given unless appropriate for the purposes otherwise.

Table 1 displays the correlation matrix for the variables of the study.



**Table 1: Correlation matrix**

	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]	[8]	[9]	[10]	[11]	[12]	[13]	[14]
Internet participation [1]	1.00	-0.33**	-0.04	0.16**	0.11**	0.21**	0.15**	0.00	-0.04	0.46**	0.42**	0.20**	0.21**	0.14**
Age [2]		1.00	0.04	-0.16**	-0.09*	0.13**	-0.14**	0.00	0.05	0.06	-0.24**	0.13**	0.03	-0.04
Gender [3]			1.00	-0.07	0.11**	0.11**	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.04	-0.19**	0.05	0.22**	0.17**
Education [4]				1.00	0.35**	0.10**	0.20**	0.10**	0.11**	0.14**	0.28**	0.21**	0.28**	0.21**
Household income [5]					1.00	0.13**	0.15**	0.16**	0.11**	0.15**	0.20**	0.18**	0.30**	0.19**
Political interest [6]						1.00	0.21**	0.08*	0.15**	0.30**	0.13**	0.18**	0.34**	0.33**
External political efficacy [7]							1.00	0.32**	0.40**	0.17**	0.08*	0.14**	0.17**	0.39**
Satisfaction democracy [8]								1.00	0.38**	0.09*	-0.03	0.09*	0.07	0.14**
Political trust [9]									1.00	.10**	-0.06	0.07	0.08*	0.20**
Traditional participation [10]										1.00	0.34**	0.42**	0.16**	0.23**
Political consumerism [11]											1.00	0.18**	0.17**	0.12**
Associational membership [12]												1.00	0.23**	0.14**
Political knowledge [13]													1.00	0.25**
Internal efficacy [14]														1.00

Note: Pearson's correlation coefficients. \*\*: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) \*: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As can be seen, there are quite strong correlations between some of the independent variables. Nevertheless, VIF scores suggest that multicollinearity is not a problem, since all scores are below 1.5 (see appendix).

### 3. Analysis

To start the analysis, table 2 displays data on the extent of political involvement in Internet activities along with corresponding figures for involvement in various offline political activities.

**Table 2: Percentages performing online and offline forms of political activities**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percentage has done</b>
<b>Online activities on the Internet</b>	
Sign petition	30.1
Contact political decision-makers	10.9
Take part in discussion	10.7
Donate money	3.0
Send/receive political e-mails	9.8
Write on blog	1.7
<b>Offline activities</b>	
Sign petition	49.5
Contact decision-makers	25.1
Write letter to the editor	17.9
Participate in activities of political party	13.3
Participate in other associational activities	44.3
Consumption to promote environmental protection	63.8
Consumption to promote political/social goals	40.9
Boycott	19.6
Legal demonstration	7.6
Civil disobedience	2.2

Note: Data weighted to ensure sample fit with population. Question phrasing: Internet activities: 'The Internet and e-mail has created new possibilities for acting politically and gaining information. During the last four years, have you done any of the following on the Internet, or what would you be willing to do?', percentage has done. Offline activities: 'Below are various forms of civic engagement. Please indicate which of these you have done during the last four years?'. Percentage has done activity in question.

The results show that Internet activities have become a popular part of the participatory repertoire in Finland. The most popular online activity is signing a petition, which more than 30 per cent have done during the last four years. Other popular Internet activities are contacting decision-makers and taking part in political discussions, each of which has been done by slightly less than 11 per cent, while about 10 per cent have been sending and receiving emails on political matters. Several of these activities have been accused of being slacktivism since they are literally possible to perform with just a push of a button (Christensen, 2011a).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that these indicators do not involve the most grievous examples of slacktivism that are connected to new social media such as Twitter and Facebook and the possibilities they offer for expressing political views. Even if the present data does not make it possible to discern the factors associated with these activities, it is likely that they are similar given previous research (Loader and Mercea 2012, p4).

Although the online activities are popular, the offline activities retain a higher popularity among the Finns. About 49.5 per cent have signed a petition and about 25 per cent have contacted the decision-makers offline. However, it should be noted that the phrasings of the questions on offline activities does not specify that the activities should not be done on the Internet. Hence, it is likely that some respondents only performed the online versions of petition signing and contacting, which exist in both online and offline versions (Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011). In addition, the questions on offline activities were asked in a personal interview, meaning the real extent of involvement is likely to be overestimated, since respondents answer in the affirmative to live up to social expectations (Cassel 2003). This risk is diminished for the Internet activities, where the questionnaires were filled out in privacy. Hence, the figures are likely to overestimate the differences between online and offline activities.

Nonetheless, the extent of involvement in the most popular Internet activities is comparable to the level of engagement in traditional forms of political participation such as being active in connection to a political party and taking part in legal demonstrations. The data presented in Table 2 thus confirm that the Internet activities have become an ingrained part of the participatory landscape in Finland. The central question is what implications this development has for the state of democracy. The three accusations of slacktivism presented above are examined individually in the following.

### 3.1. Detachment

According to this claim, Internet participation is slacktivism since digital activists become active because they are disenchanting with the traditional political system and the possibilities it offers for influencing the political decision-making (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Haye, 2007; Johnson and Kaye, 1998;). Hence, the hypothesis to be examined here is whether Internet activism is associated with political detachment in the form of negative feelings towards the political system.

This claim is examined by studying the relationship between various political attitudes and the extent of involvement on the Internet. Although it as noted is not possible to settle the direction of causality for these characteristics (Verba et al., 1995, p276-279), the strengths of the associations indicate the most important characteristics of the Internet participants. *Political interest* has been considered a primary indicator for how involved citizens are in the political sphere and the feelings towards government and politics (Norris, 2002). The perception of system responsiveness, or *external political efficacy*, is also an important indicator for political detachment (Almond and Verba, 1963). Furthermore, *satisfaction with democracy* indicates the political disenchantment of the respondent (Hay, 2007, p31). Finally, the level of *political trust* in the central political institutions is a central component in determining the attitude of citizens to the formal political system (Hay, 2007, p33). All four political attitudes may be considered central components in determining how detached the Internet activists are.

If this accusation is correct, significant negative relationships should exist between the indicators and the level of Internet participation. Table 3 displays the results of the regression analyses.

Table 3: Internet activism and digital detachment

	Model 1 Indicators of detachment	Model 2 Full model with controls
Political interest	1.28 (0.32)***	2.19 (0.37)***
External efficacy	1.56 (0.39)***	0.56 (0.46)
Satisfaction democracy	-0.24 (0.42)	-0.25 (0.45)
Political trust	-1.51 (0.57)**	-1.13 (0.61)
Age		-5.47 (0.56)***
Gender (1= male)		-0.38 (0.17)*
Education		0.69 (0.31)*
Household income		0.46 (0.24)
Valid n	711	655
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	0.06	0.25

Note: Entries are coefficients of an ordinal logistic regression with standard errors in parenthesis. All explanatory variables range between 0 and 1. Internet participation is an index composed of seven internet activities ranging from 0-1 with 1 indicating the highest possible extent of involvement. Data weighted to reflect population. \*:  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ .

The results show that being involved on the Internet is strongly associated with a high extent of political interest, which indicates that the Internet activists are highly interested in political matters and thereby contradicts the accusation of political detachment. A similar finding is initially found for external efficacy, indicating that the Internet activists tend to think the political system is responsive to their demands. However, this estimate grows insignificant in model 2 when controlling for the socio-demographic factors. Nevertheless, the link remains positive and the result does not indicate that a lack of belief in the responsiveness of the system is a major driving force for Internet activism. There are however, suggestions that this could be the case when it comes to satisfaction with democracy, where there is a tendency for the Internet activists to be dissatisfied. However, the estimate is weak and insignificant, so this can hardly be taken as conclusive evidence in favour of the hypothesis. Political trust provides the strongest evidence in favour of this accusation, since a significant negative estimate in model 1 suggests a lack of confidence in political authorities and actors is a major driving force for Internet activism. However, when controlling for the socio-demographic factors, this linkage becomes insignificant.

Although there is conflicting evidence for this accusation, it seems most appropriate to reject the hypothesis that Internet activism is associated with political detachment since there is not consistent evidence that this is the case.

### 3.2. Inactivity

This accusation alleges that Internet activism is slacktivism since the participants are unwilling to 'get their hands dirty' through traditional political activities (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2009, 2011; Putnam, 2000). Hence, the hypothesis is that Internet activism is associated with a lack of involvement in offline activities.

This claim is examined by discerning the association between Internet activism and three forms of offline engagement in political and civic activities:<sup>7</sup> *Traditional political participation, political consumerism and involvement in voluntary associations*. These three measures are important forms of political and civic activities off the net (Christensen, 2011b, Norris, 2002; Verba et al., 1995). They hereby gauge how willing the Internet participants are to engage in political activities outside the digital sphere.

If this allegation is true, the regression models should show significant negative associations between the forms of civic and political involvement and Internet activism, since this entails that the Internet activists are less likely than the general population to be involved in political matters outside the virtual world. Table 4 displays the results.

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<sup>7</sup> Strictly speaking this analysis ought to address the effect of Internet participation on the various forms of offline engagement; i.e. Internet participation should be the independent variable. However, given the data is cross-sectional the relationships would be similar. The current format is chosen to make the results comparable to those obtained in other sections.

Table 4: Internet activism and inactivity

	Model 1 Indicators of inactivity	Model 2 Full model with controls
Traditional political participation	2.53 (0.30)***	3.12 (0.34)***
Political consumerism	2.57 (0.27)***	1.95 (0.31)***
Associational membership	-0.03 (0.58)	1.61 (0.66)*
Age		-6.13 (0.60)***
Gender (1= male)		-0.02 (0.18)
Education		0.17 (0.32)
Household income		0.05 (0.25)
Valid n	750	685
Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke)	0.30	0.43

Note: Entries are coefficients of an ordinal logistic regression with standard errors in parenthesis. All explanatory variables range between 0 and 1. Internet participation is an index composed of seven internet activities ranging from 0-1 with 1 indicating the highest possible extent of involvement. Data weighted to reflect population. \*:  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ .

The results for traditional political participation show that there is a strong *positive* relationship between this and Internet activism, which persists when controlling for the socio-demographic factors. The same pattern is found for political consumerism, where a strong positive relationship suggests that Internet activists are more likely to be active in other forms of civic engagement than just the traditional political activities. The result for associational activism is insignificant in the first model, but it grows significant after controlling for the socio-demographic factors, suggesting that the Internet activists are also more likely to be active in this regard.

These results do not suggest that Internet participants are any less likely to be active in offline political and civic activities and the hypothesis is therefore rejected.

### 3.3. Competence

This accusation holds that Internet activism is slacktivism since the Internet activists lack the key political resources that make political activists savvy at the political game (Keen, 2007; Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011; Topf, 1995). The hypothesis to be examined is, therefore, that Internet activism is associated with lower levels of citizen competences.

Three indicators are used to examine this claim. The first is one of the control variables. As already clarified, *education* has been known to have a substantial impact on the propensity to be active, and therefore the analyses control for this aspect. However, education may also be conceived as a proxy for civic competence (Verba et al. 1995, p. 305). The higher educated may not only be more active, they are also better citizens (Verba, 2003). In addition to this, *internal political efficacy* is used to probe the subjective competence of the respondents, or the extent to which they feel capable of comprehending

and influencing political matters (Almond and Verba, 1963: 137; Asbjørnsen & Vogt 1992). A final indicator is the *factual political knowledge* of citizens. A cynic may contend that the subjective feeling that anyone can have an impact on political matters is a rather poor indicator of whether this is actually true. It is therefore necessary to consider the factual political knowledge of citizens to ensure that they are not merely misguided in their perception of how politics function (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996).

The expectation according to the hypothesis is that there are negative associations between the indicators of civic competence and Internet engagement, since this would suggest that the Internet participants are less politically competent than the population at large. Table 5 presents the results of the analyses.

**Table 5: Internet activism and digital competence**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
	<b>Indicators of competence</b>	<b>Full model with controls</b>
<b>Political knowledge</b>	1.38 (0.40) <sup>***</sup>	2.10 (0.44) <sup>***</sup>
<b>Internal efficacy</b>	0.64 (0.24) <sup>**</sup>	0.87 (0.27) <sup>**</sup>
<b>Education</b>	0.98 (0.27) <sup>***</sup>	0.34 (0.31)
<b>Age</b>		-5.24 (0.53) <sup>***</sup>
<b>Gender</b>		-0.55 (0.17) <sup>**</sup>
<b>Household income</b>		0.34 (0.31)
<b>Valid n</b>	748	682
<b>Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke)</b>	0.07	0.24

Note: Entries are coefficients of an ordinal logistic regression with standard errors in parenthesis. All explanatory variables range between 0 and 1. Internet participation is an index composed of seven internet activities ranging from 0-1 with 1 indicating the highest possible extent of involvement. Data weighted to reflect population. \*:  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ .

The results show a positive estimate for political knowledge, which persists in both models. This indicates that a higher level of political knowledge positively is associated with a higher propensity to be active in political activities on the Internet. There is also a positive estimate for internal efficacy, indicating that Internet activity is associated with a higher belief in one's own ability to influence political matters. Finally, there is initially a positive estimate for education, indicating that people with higher levels of education are more likely to be active on the Internet, but this grows insignificant when controlling for the other socio-demographic factors.

Overall, there is nothing to support the suggestion that the Internet activists lack central political competences and this hypothesis is therefore rejected.

### 3.4. The complete story of Internet participation

As we have seen in the preceding analyses, the three accusations are contradicted by most of the available evidence. To ascertain the validity of the results, all three accusations

are examined simultaneously in this section to examine their relative merits. The results of four models are shown in table 6.

**Table 6: The complete story of Internet activism**

	Model 1 Socio-demographic	Model 2 + Disenchantment	Model 3 + Inactivity	Model 4 + Competence
Age	-4.77 (0.51) ***	-5.47 (0.56) ***	-6.43 (0.64) ***	-6.65 (0.65) ***
Gender	-0.25 (0.16)	-0.38 (0.17) *	-0.07 (0.18)	-0.23 (0.19)
Education	0.89 (0.30) **	0.69 (0.31) *	0.15 (0.33)	-0.12 (0.34)
Household income	0.50 (0.24) *	0.46 (0.24)	0.06 (0.26)	-0.13 (0.27)
Political interest		2.19 (0.37) ***	1.28 (0.39) **	0.77 (0.42)
External efficacy		0.56 (0.46)	-0.33 (0.49)	-0.06 (0.51)
Satisfaction democracy		-0.25 (0.45)	-0.24 (0.48)	-0.13 (0.49)
Political trust		-1.13 (0.61)	-0.95 (0.66)	-0.89 (0.66)
Traditional political involvement			2.95 (0.36) ***	3.12 (0.37) ***
Political consumerism			1.82 (0.32) ***	1.74 (0.32) ***
Associational membership			1.55 (0.66) *	1.27 (0.67)
Political knowledge				1.86 (0.51) ***
Internal efficacy				0.36 (0.32)
Valid n	684	665	655	654
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)	0.19	0.25	0.44	0.46

Note: Entries are coefficients of an ordinal logistic regression with standard errors in parenthesis. All explanatory variables range between 0 and 1. Internet participation is an index composed of seven internet activities ranging from 0-1 with 1 indicating the highest possible extent of involvement. Data weighted to reflect population. \*:  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ .

Model 1 examines the associations between Internet activism and the socio-demographic control variables. The estimates are generally as expected, with the possible exception that there are no significant differences when it comes to gender. This suggests that Internet participation is gender neutral in a Finnish context. The strongest estimate is found for age, where there as expected is a strong tendency for Internet participants to be younger than the population at large.

Models 2-4 examine the relative merits of the three accusations when including all factors, and the results generally replicate the previous findings.

For the first accusation of political detachment, the evidence is mixed since political interest and external efficacy initially have positive estimates and satisfaction with democracy and political trust have negative estimates in model 2. However, only political interest is significant in model 2 and none of them is significant in the final model. Hence, there is still little to suggest that this is a major driving force for Internet participation.

The strongest finding is that the evidence strongly contradicts the second accusation that the Internet may lead citizens to replace conventional forms of participation with more comfortable Internet participation. Both traditional political involvement and political consumerism is still strongly associated with Internet activism, suggesting that



rather than being slacktivists, the Internet participants tend to be active in a broad range of activities. These factors also explain the most of the variation, as indicated by the increase in the pseudo  $R^2$  when including these factors. There seems to be little doubt that the Internet activists are extending their political commitment to the Internet rather than replacing their offline commitments with digital ones.

The evidence also still contradicts the third allegation that the Internet activists should be misguided activists who are directing their sincere commitments in the wrong directions. The positive connection between political knowledge and Internet activity persists even when controlling for all other factors. There is therefore little to suggest that the Internet activists should be politically misguided.

#### 4. Conclusions

After initial euphoria, critical voices have raised concern over the effects of the Internet on political participation and democracy. These accusations claim that Internet activism amount to nothing more than slacktivism, which makes no impact on real-life political outcomes but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants. This study has examined three such claims in a Finnish context: That the participants are detached from formal politics, that the Internet activities replace traditional, and more effective, means of activism, and that the Internet participants are unable to comprehend the complexities of politics.

Although the critique is almost certainly right in rejecting the most jubilant claims of the democratizing force of the Internet, the results obtained here do not support the dismissal of political activities on the Internet as merely slacktivism.

To sum up the results, the evidence was mixed for the first accusation of detachment, but there was nothing to suggest that negative attitudes towards the formal political system were a major driving force for Internet participation as suggested by scholars (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Haye, 2007; Johnson and Kaye, 1998). For the second accusation, there is clear evidence that Internet participation supplements rather than replaces traditional activities, whether in the form of genuine political participation or other forms of civic engagement. Hence, there is nothing to suggest that the Internet is culpable for the diminishing civic and political engagement that the established democracies have witnessed (Morozov, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Although there are undoubtedly people who are only active on the Internet, the most persistent interpretation seem to be that people who are active in traditional offline activities are more likely to be active online as well, but they do not substitute their conventional involvement with the digital version. There is also no evidence to support the third accusation that Internet participants are less competent citizens (Keen, 2007). Instead, they appear to be knowledgeable citizens with an appropriate level of civic sophistication and there is nothing to suggest that Internet activists do not know their way around the political universe.

Despite the seemingly good news, there is still reason to be cautious. That the Internet activists extent their traditional engagement to the digital sphere may also entail that this engagement replicates the traditional inequalities so common when it comes to offline

political participation (Norris, 2001; Hirzalla et al., 2010; Verba et al., 1995). These fears have not been addressed in a systematic manner here. Nevertheless, the socio-demographic factors employed as control variables do not indicate that there are immense differences in these regards. There is a tendency for the well-educated and better-off economically to be overrepresented, but this effect disappears when considering the three other potential explanations. Hence, attitudes and activities appear to be more important than resources for Internet participation, which contradicts the idea of a digital divide (Norris, 2001). Nevertheless, these findings are far from conclusive.

The present results also do not make it possible to tell whether the digital activities are more or less effective political tools than the traditional counterparts. Even if the Internet activists were found to be competent citizens otherwise, this does not necessarily entail that the Internet activities are effective means to achieve the stated aims. The results do not imply that the digital activities can replace the traditional forms of participation and provide an adequate digital sphere of participation. Instead, Morozov (2011) is almost certainly right in claiming that the most optimistic assessments of the impact of the Internet are exaggerated since social media in itself cannot cause democracy. Any notion of a digital democracy is complementary to the traditional democratic engagement, and there is little doubt that the need for involvement in traditional political activities will persist into the near future.

Nevertheless, even if the most jubilant views are unwarranted, no evidence was found to suggest that the Internet is directly harmful for democratic engagement, which is what the accusations of slacktivism propose. The Internet sparks new forms of civic engagement that differ from previous forms of engagement. Even if these new activities are effortless and do not expose the participants to risks of any harm, they can give rise to intensely energetic efforts for limited periods of time (Schudson, 2006).

Most importantly, no results suggest that the Internet activists are substituting their offline engagement with the possibilities the Internet offers, which has been a central accusation against Internet participation (Morozov, 2009; Putnam, 2000). This result replicates previous findings (Boulianne, 2009; Christensen 2011), indicating that the most apt citizens blend offline and online modes of participation (Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011). It may therefore be long overdue to acquit Internet activism of at least this accusation.

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## Appendix - Variable coding and descriptive statistics

	Coding	Descriptive statistics					
		N	Min	Max	Mean	St.d.	VIF
<b>Internet participation</b>	Additive index created from 6 answers to question: <i>The Internet and e-mail has created new possibilities for acting politically and gaining information. During the last four years, have you done any of the following on the Internet, or what would you be willing to do?:</i> (1) Sign petition, (2) Contact decision-makers, (3) Take part in discussion, (4) Donate money, (5) Send/receive political e-mails, (6) Write blog. (1 highest extent of involvement)	746	0.00	1.00	0.11	0.18	
<b>Age</b>	Age of respondent in years divided by 100.	806	0.19	0.91	0.52	0.17	1.19
<b>Gender</b>	Gender of respondent (1 = male)	806	0.00	1.00	0.49	0.50	1.17
<b>Education</b>	Highest level of education completed: Six categories ranging from 'Primary school (0) to University degree (1).	806	0.00	1.00	0.54	0.29	1.30
<b>Household income</b>	Household income in Euros divided into four categories, 1 Highest income level.	736	0.00	1.00	0.56	0.35	1.23
<b>Political interest</b>	<i>How interested are you in politics?</i> Four categories ranging from 'not at all interested' (0) to 'very interested' (1).	806	0.00	1.00	0.67	0.25	1.32
<b>External efficacy</b>	Additive index created from answers to four questions with 4 categories ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (1 highest extent of external efficacy): - <i>Those elected to parliament soon lose touch with the problems of ordinary people.</i> - <i>Politicians are not interested in the opinions of ordinary people.</i> - <i>Political parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions.</i> - <i>It doesn't really matter which parties form the government, policy decisions will be the same.</i>	782	0.00	1.00	0.45	0.22	1.47
<b>Satisfaction democracy</b>	<i>How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Finland?</i> Four categories ranging from 'Not at all satisfied' (0) to 'Very satisfied' (1).	799	0.00	1.00	0.60	0.20	1.22
<b>Political trust</b>	Additive index created from 5 answers to question: <i>On a scale of 0 to 10 (where 0 = don't trust at all, 10 = completely trust), to what extent do you trust/mistrust:</i> (1) The President, (2) Political parties, (3) Parliament, (4) The Government, (5) Politicians (1 Highest extent of political trust).	792	0.00	1.00	0.65	0.15	1.35
<b>Traditional political involvement</b>	Additive index created from 4 answers to question: <i>Below are various forms of civic engagement. Please indicate which of these you have done during the last four years.</i> (1) 'write letter to the editor', (2) 'contact decision-makers', (3) 'involved political party', (4) 'involved other civic association'. (1 Highest extent of involvement)	806	0.00	1.00	0.25	0.28	1.45
<b>Political consumerism</b>	Additive index created from 3 answers to question: <i>Below are various forms of civic engagement. Please indicate which of these you have done during the last four years.</i> (1) 'Sign petition', (2) 'Try to influence political or social issues through my consumer choices', (3) 'Join a consumer boycott', (1 highest extent of involvement)	806	0.00	1.00	0.44	0.33	1.40
<b>Associational membership</b>	Index created from question: <i>How many other than work or profession related associations does the respondent currently belong to?</i> (Paying member) Altogether about... (1 Highest number mentioned (16))	806	0.00	1.00	0.09	0.13	1.31
<b>Political</b>	Additive index created by adding correct answer to 7 factual	806	0.00	1.00	0.67	0.21	1.33

	Coding	Descriptive statistics					
		N	Min	Max	Mean	St.d.	VIF
<b>knowledge</b>	<p>questions (1 = All questions right):</p> <p><i>Who of the following was the Finnish Foreign Minister in 2010?</i></p> <p><i>Which of the following parties has the fourth largest number of seats in the newly elected Parliament?</i></p> <p><i>Who is entitled to vote in Finnish parliamentary elections?</i></p> <p><i>What do you think is meant by a parliamentary system?</i></p> <p><i>What percentage of people living in Finland are foreign nationals?</i></p> <p><i>Which of the following is the largest group of foreign nationals residing in Finland?</i></p> <p><i>What is the European Union (EU) treaty that came into force at the end of the year 2009 called?</i></p>						
<b>Internal efficacy</b>	<p>Question: <i>Sometimes politics seems so complicated that I can't really understand what is going on.</i> Four categories ranging from 'strongly agree' (0) to strongly disagree (1).</p>	804	0.00	1.00	0.37	0.32	1.37
<b>Unweighted valid N (listwise)</b>		651					