

The Network Matters: Social Media Networks and Political Expression

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Doi: 10.19044/elp.v4no3a3 [URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/elp.v4no3a3](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/elp.v4no3a3)

Abstract

Political engagement on social media is an important way for many individuals to express their political opinions and beliefs. Research has not fully explained the mechanism by which individuals use social media for political purposes. The 2012 U.S. Presidential Election provided a useful context to understand this mechanism. Thus, the study uses a representative survey sample of U.S. adults to examine the importance of the social media network on individuals' political expression on these sites. After controlling for a host of demographic and attention to news media variables, the results suggest the more individuals' social media network expresses themselves politically on social media, the more likely individuals express themselves too.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Participation, News.

Introduction

Although individual attributes contribute to engagement in political behavior, with which individuals exchange information and opinions about politics is also important (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991). As Granovetter (1973) argues, weak ties can play an indispensable role in integrating individuals into a social structure. The broader their social networks, the more likely they expose themselves to larger environments of public opinion; therefore, individuals' social network construction filters information about news and politics (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995). People oftentimes do not randomly choose their networks from which they obtain information; rather, they seek out social environments that correspond with their personal attitudes and opinions about politics. However, individuals cannot always completely control the networks from which they receive information and opinions (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987). In general, the more individuals connect with others, the more they will seek out political information (Chaffee & McLeod, 1973).

A host of factors explains the extent to which social networks affect political engagement. For example, the level of respect one has for someone in his or her network as well as the frequency with which he or she receives information from someone is important. In addition, social networks' distribution of information and opinions will affect individuals differently depending on the political issue (Kenny, 1993). Moreover, the types of information individuals' social networks share and the timing of sharing information during political campaigns or events contribute to its influence (MacKuen & Brown, 1987).

This study considers the role of the social media network on political expression online during the 2012 United States Presidential Election. Specifically, a survey of United States individuals examines whether exposure to their social media networks' political expression fosters individuals' own political expression on these sites. Knowing social networks play an important role in peoples' political engagement, examining these relationships on social media is worthwhile. These online networks and the resources they provide refer to individuals' social capital, a concept that has received much scholarly attention. The following sections define social capital and then examine the relationships between social media and social capital production.

Literature Review

Robert Putnam's social capital definition emphasizes the connections among individuals—the social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness from them (Putnam, 2000). “Bonding” social capital includes close-knit groups and “bridging” social capital occurring through looser networks but with the potential to produce broader connectedness and reciprocity. Information is a key resource of social capital; the current study notes the importance of information exchange on social media.

The relationship between social capital and civic engagement is positive, and these relationships can represent a “virtuous” or “vicious” cycle (Brehm & Rahn, 1997). Individuals who are connected to social groups likely benefit the most from social capital, and the social groups to which these people belong likely influence their civic behavior (Portes, 1998). Resources from individuals' social networks have a positive influence on the ways in which individuals gather and make sense of information (Lin, 1999). The more individuals connect with others and the more those social connections can foster information exchange, the more likely individuals will participate in civic and political activities. Online communication, more specifically social media, affords individuals immersive ways to exchange information with their network; therefore, scholars have examined the implications of this phenomenon.

Social media afford individuals distinct ways to communicate and establish social connections with others. A networked public sphere, largely comprised on online social networks, allows individuals the opportunity to be reflective about communication in which they engage (Friedland, Hove & Rojas, 2006). These social networks (facilitated by social media) significantly alter the ways in which we understand communicative behavior. Individuals connect with those with whom they already have a relationship or encounter individuals they do not know well.

In this online space with social connections, individuals will present themselves in ways that invites others to connect with them. Individuals have control over their online social networks, so they will seek out and try to connect with certain people. Although individuals may not greatly increase the number of strong ties (bonding social capital), they are more likely to develop weak tie relationships (Donath & boyd, 2004). Merely visiting social media may not be good at enhancing proximal relationships but helpful in expanding individuals' network diversity (Hampton, Lee & Her, 2011).

Scholars have examined the social capital benefits of Facebook in depth, primarily because it is a popular social medium. Young people using Facebook report high levels of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The more individuals use Facebook, the more Facebook friends they have, and the more they feel emotionally connected to the site, the more likely they develop loose ties and networks associated with bridging social capital (Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe, 2008). Importantly, their methodological approach suggests individuals' social media engagement influences or affects their reported social capital.

Social media offer a variety of social capital enhancing activities; thus, considering specific activities is important. Facebook's social capital benefits are most likely do to the ways in which individuals use the site, not users' demographic characteristics, suggesting a direct relationship (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009). For example, joining groups is one popular activity that Facebook users can participate in, and doing so results in creating social connections (Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009). These activities allow individuals to connect with people they know well and those with whom they are only acquainted. The extent to which using sites like Facebook contribute to individuals' social capital depends on more than their established online social network on the site (e.g., friends). Users must continuously monitor and engage with their connections and attempt to interact with connections of connections (Ellison, Vitak, Gray & Lampe, 2014).

Social-mediated social capital contributes to political expression online. People can view their online social networks behavior, such as sharing news information and expressing opinions about current affairs. In turn, individuals can use that information and opinion expression to share their

own information and opinions about news and politics. The more people interact with others online and feel connected to them, the more likely they are to participate politically online (Skoric, Ying, & Ng, 2009). Viewing online political discussions on political blogs and socially connecting with other blogs users encourages individuals' own political expression on blogs (Greuling & Kilian, 2014) as well as other forms of online engagement, including emailing others to vote during elections, signing online petitions and giving money online (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril & Rojas, 2009). The more individuals attend to news and information sharing via social media, the more likely they are to engage in their own political expression online (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). The relationship holds true for participating politically on social media specifically, as engaging with online social networks is strongly related to displaying political preferences, friending candidates, joining a cause or political and other activities on social media (Bode, Vraga, Borah and Shah, 2013).

In summary, the relationship between social media use and social capital is positive, suggesting the more individuals use social media, the more they acquire benefits associated with social connections and norms of reciprocity. Social media afford individuals opportunities to connect with others with whom they already have a strong connection as well as people and organizations with whom they are not intimately connected. Social media users can view their online networks engaging in sharing behavior, including posting about news and politics and sharing opinions about current events. Individuals coming across this shared information via online social networks tend to engage in online political expressive behaviors themselves.

In addition to social capital predicting online expressive political behavior, motivations for using social media in certain ways also relates to online expression. For example, the more individuals fulfilling motivations for using social media to share information, the more they tend to post links to news media. Other motivations, including entertainment and passing time, are not related (Baek, Holton, Harp & Yaschur, 2011, Lee & Ma, 2012). Attention to traditional news media also plays a role in social media expression, but their effects may not be universal. For example, attention to a variety of news sources relates to online monetary contributions to campaigns and signing up online to volunteer for campaigns and issues (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). In some situations, attention to online news predicts political expression online, but attention to newspapers and television news does not (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril & Rojas, 2009; Skoric, Ying, & Ng, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010). Considering political behavior on social media specifically, for some users, attention to television news may be negatively related to posting links to

political news stories, but attention to print news may be positively related to status updates including political content (Macafee, 2013).

Overall, previous literature suggests individuals fulfilling information seeking and sharing motivations for using social media tend to engage in online expressive behavior on these sites. Individuals' with other motivation for using social media, such as to be entertained and to pass time, are unrelated online political expression. Regarding attention to news, those who seek information online are also those who engage politically online. The relationship between attention to traditional news sources, such as newspapers and television, and online political expression may be less clear.

Hypotheses

Therefore, this study builds on previous literature surrounding the relationships between information exchange motivations for using social media, attention to news and social capital and individuals' social media political expressive behavior. The current study uses individuals' exposure to their online social networks' expressive political social media behavior as a proxy of social capital. The resources individuals obtain from their online social networks sharing information and opinions about politics provides a unique approach to examine the influence it has on their own social media political expression.

H1: Attention to online news is positively related to individuals' social media expressive behavior

H2: Individuals' information exchange motivation for using social media is positively related to individuals' social media expressive behavior

H3: Exposure to individuals' social media networks expressive behavior is positively related to individuals' own social media expressive behavior

Methods

Sample

To build the study's measures, the study first administered an online pilot survey of U.S. adults ($N = 75$), asking open-ended questions about reasons they use social media, activities in which they participate on social media, and in what ways they express themselves politically, offline and online. Using the pilot data as well as previous established measures, the study used Qualtrics to survey a more representative sample of U.S. adults ($n = 501$) shortly after the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election. Qualtrics collaborates with market research companies that recruit individuals to take surveys for compensation, and the study established quotas to match the demographic characteristics of U.S. citizens (e.g., sex, education).⁹ The

⁹ U.S. census bureau survey information taken from

survey was funded by a grant from the Journal Foundation used to compensate Qualtrics for fielding the survey.

Measures

Demographics

The study uses common demographic characteristics as control variables, including age, gender, race, education, income and political ideology. The survey asked respondents to list their age, and I coded responses into the following categories: 1 = 17 to 24; 2 = 25 to 34; 3 = 35 to 44; 4 = 45 to 54; 5 = 55 to 64 ($M = 39.66$ years old; $SD = 12.89$ years. Half (i.e., 50.1 percent) of the respondents were female, and a large majority of the current study's respondents reported themselves as Caucasian (79.2 percent). The remaining respondents comprise individuals of all other races (20.8 percent). Respondents' education used a common scale: 1 = high school incomplete; 2 = high school graduate; 3 = technical, trade or vocational school after high school; 4 = some college, no four-year degree; 5 = college graduate; 6 = post-training/professional school after college ($M = 3.62$; $SD = 1.33$). Respondents in the current study also reported in what annual household income bracket they fell: 0 = less than \$10,000; 1 = \$10,000 to under \$20,000; 2 = \$20,000 to under \$30,000; 3 = \$30,000 to under \$40,000; 4 = \$40,000 to under \$50,000; 5 = \$50,000 to under \$75,000; 6 = \$75,000 to under \$100,000; 7 = \$100,000 to under \$150,000; 8 = \$150,000 and more ($M = 4.19$; $SD = 2.04$). Lastly, respondents reported being slightly more conservative in their political ideology: 1 = very conservative; 5 = very liberal ($M = 2.80$; $SD = .95$).

Social media motivations

The survey asked respondents 10 questions regarding their agreement (0 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) regarding their reasons about why they used social media, including to keep in touch with family and friends, to get information and news, to share opinions and information, because of boredom, convenience and habit-formation, and to be entertained. Initially, the study hoped to create several variables measuring different motivations for using social media, resembling motivation variables used in studies examining similar phenomenon. These variables included motivations for social connection, information gathering and self-presentation. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses suggest motivations for using social media may not be distinct. Specifically, items measuring motivations to gather and share information loaded on one factor, while the items measuring a social connection motivation do not load strongly on any factor.

In addition, although items associated with a passing time motivation may suggest a second factor, the study chose to eliminate that motivation due to the “messiness” of individuals’ motivations for using social media. Specifically, people can visit social media to fulfill different motivations all at once. The interactive features social media afford can fulfill users’ motivations associated with social connections, information exchange, and entertainment and leisure simultaneously. For example, users can post social media status updates to fulfill motivations to share information at the same time hoping to fulfill motivations to seek information from their online social networks. Likewise, individuals can read Facebook or Twitter news feeds to fulfill motivations to seek information and be entertained. Previous research has demonstrated a significant relationship between motivations associated with information exchange and attention to online news; therefore, the study attempts to build on these findings.

Thus, the study uses a single social media motivation variable comprising four items tapping an information exchange motivations for using these media: get information; get news; share opinions; share information ($M = 13.44$; $SD = 5.52$; $\alpha = .92$). These four items load cleanly on one factor, with all factor loadings over .78. Table 1 presents the initial confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 1: Motivation Factor Analysis

| <i>Pattern Matrix</i> | | |
|--|-------|-------|
| To keep in touch with family and friends | .412 | .219 |
| To connect with others socially | .587 | .217 |
| To get information | .708 | .123 |
| To get news | .749 | .052 |
| To share opinions | .952 | -.047 |
| To share information | 1.025 | -.119 |
| Because of boredom | -.028 | .703 |
| Because it is convenient | .244 | .623 |
| Because it is habit-forming | -.027 | .840 |

Note: Maximum-likelihood with promax rotation for confirmatory analysis

Attention to news

The study also included attention to news, broadcast, print and online. Attention to TV news is an additive index of two items asking respondents how often (0 = never; 5 = frequently) they received news from local news and national television news broadcasts ($M = 7.39$; $SD = 2.72$; $r = .77$). Attention to print news is an additive index of three items using the same scale for receiving news from print versions of local newspapers, national newspapers and news magazines ($M = 6.26$; $SD = 4.40$; $\alpha = .84$). Attention to online news is an additive index of five items using the same scale for

receiving news from local, national and cable TV news websites, portal news websites and prominent news weblogs ($M = 14.30$; $SD = 6.44$; $\alpha = .81$).

Social media political participation

The study wanted to measure respondents' perceptions about other social media users' political behavior and respondents' own social media political activity. To do so, this survey asked how often (0 = never; 5 = frequently) respondents saw other social media users participate in five activities (i.e., post political comments; post political news; post political pictures; "like" something political; sign a political petition) of expressive social media behavior during the 2012 elections ($M = 14.84$; $SD = 7.50$; $\alpha = .94$). Similarly, respondents answered the same set of questions for their own political behavior during the 2012 elections ($M = 10.42$; $SD = 8.06$; $\alpha = .94$). The study did not want to include any information-seeking behavior to avoid conflating online information seeking behavior with social media political engagement. Table 2 presents the variables of interest descriptive statistics, and Table 3 presents the correlations among the variables.

Table 2: Variables Descriptive Statistics

| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Cronbach's Alpha |
|--|-------|--------------------|------------------|
| <i>Social Media Political Expression</i> | | | |
| Networks' | 14.84 | 7.50 | .94 |
| Self | 10.42 | 8.06 | .94 |

Table 3: Variable Correlations

| | Networks' Expressive Behavior | Self's Expressive Behavior |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Age | -.18* | -.30* |
| Gender | -.02 | .05 |
| Race | -.07 | -.24* |
| Education | .09 | .04 |
| Income | .08 | .02 |
| Ideology | -.04 | -.06 |
| TV News | .15* | .22* |
| Print News | .31* | .47* |
| Motivation | .45* | .54* |
| Online News | .36* | .54* |
| Networks' Expression | - | .57* |

Note: * $p < .01$

Results

To answer H1-3, the current study used regression analyses with four variable blocks. The model is significant ($F = 54.05$; $p < .001$; $df = 11$),

explaining about 54 percent of the variance in the dependent variable. The first block includes control variables, including individuals' demographic characteristics and attention to television and print news. The second variable block includes the information exchange motivation variable, and the third block includes attention to online news. The fourth and final block includes the extent to which respondents' viewed their social media networks engage in political expression on the sites.

Considering the controls block, age ($\beta = -.23$; $p < .001$) and attention to television ($\beta = .11$; $p < .01$) and print ($\beta = .38$; $p < .001$) news is related. When adding the information exchange motivation variable, age and attention to print news retain their significance. Notably, gender becomes significantly related ($\beta = .11$; $p < .01$), and attention to television news loses its significance. The information exchange motivation variable shows a strong, positive relationship ($\beta = .43$; $p < .001$). For the third block, age, gender, attention to print news and the motivation variable all retain their significance. Attention to online news is also positively related ($\beta = .24$; $p < .001$). In the fourth and final block, age and gender along with the motivation and attention to news variables retain their significance. In addition, the more respondents' see their social media networks engaging in political expression, the more likely they are to do the same ($\beta = .32$; $p < .001$).

Overall, the results suggest certain factors lead people to use social media to engage with politics. Namely, these individuals are slightly younger than their older counterparts are and perhaps more likely to be male. In addition, they visit social media to fulfill motivation to seek and share information with others, and they pay attention to different types of news media. Lastly, respondents' social media networks tend to express themselves politically on these sites, and exposure to this expressive behavior has a significant impact on their own political expression on social media.

The results support H1, with attention to online news positively related to respondents' social media political expression. The results also support H2, as individuals who visit social media to fulfill motivations involving information exchange are also those who used the sites to engage with politics during the 2012 elections. Lastly, individuals who came across political expression and information sharing via their social media networks were more likely to use the sites themselves to participate politically, providing support for H3. Table 4 presents the regression results.

Table 4: Self Social Media Political Expression Regression

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>B</i> |
| Age | -.23*** | -.18*** | -.15*** | -.12*** |
| Gender | .06 | .11** | .11** | .10** |
| Race | -.08 | -.07 | -.07 | -.08* |
| Education | -.06 | -.01 | -.03 | -.05 |
| Income | .02 | .06 | .04 | .01 |
| Ideology | -.05 | -.04 | -.03 | -.03 |
| TV News | .11** | .02 | -.02 | -.01 |
| Print News | .38*** | .27*** | .19*** | .15*** |
| Motivation | | .43*** | .35*** | .23*** |
| Online News | | | .24*** | .21*** |
| Networks' Expression | | | | .32*** |
| <i>Adj. R</i> ² | .28 | .43 | .46 | .54 |

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Discussion

Scholars have largely determined the importance of social media in contemporary U.S. politics. However, research has not robustly explained the underlying mechanisms that facilitate individuals' social media political expression. The 2012 U.S. Presidential Election provided a useful to help explain this socio-political phenomenon, and the current study demonstrates important relationships between news, motivations, networks, and political expression on social media.

The more people pay attention to print and online news and fulfill information exchange motivations when visiting social media, the more they participate in social media political expression. Individuals who are in tune with what is happening in their community and beyond likely have the knowledge and interest to take up opportunities to express themselves politically via social media. The results compliment previous research illustrating a relationship between attention to news media and online participation, including that which takes place on social media (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril & Rojas, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010; Macafee, 2013). In addition, the study supports scholars who suggest information seeking and sharing motivations spur engaging in political expression on social media (Baek, Holton, Harp & Yaschur, 2011; Lee & Ma, 2012). Social media afford users numerous opportunities to share political

news and opinions with their social networks and show support for political actors and issues. Thus, it makes sense that people who are motivated to use social media to exchange news and information with others would use these web sites to express themselves in politically.

However, similar to these studies, the medium through which individuals watched news may matter. The results suggest attention to print and online news relates to social media political participation, but watching television news does not. The current study suggests scholars should continue to consider the role of attention to news with distinct types of news, considering medium as well as partisan news sources (see Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril & Rojas, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010, Macafee, 2013). Furthermore, the current study supports these studies suggesting individuals turn to online sources to spur their political expression online. People can read news articles on the New York Times' website, Huffington Post, or Google, or watch a news clip from NBC news' website or their local network affiliate, and then share and oftentimes post a comment about the news via their social media accounts. Thus, it seems reasonable that this information seeking behavior would predict political expression on social media.

Lastly, and most importantly, this model considered the role respondents' online social networks play in encouraging social media political engagement. Individuals who visit social media can connect with those with whom they are already close as well as acquaintances or friends of friends. On sites like Facebook and Twitter, (two of the social media respondents reported using the most) users can easily see the activity their "friends" and other users who "follow" them are engaging in. Some of this activity during the 2012 U.S. elections may have included posting political updates and sharing viewpoints about candidates and the election.

The more individuals' reported seeing their social media network express themselves politically, the more they themselves reported doing so. In other words, the more respondents reported seeing their online networks post political comments, news, and pictures, "like" something political, and sign a political petition, the more likely they did similar things. This supports a long history of research suggesting the resources obtained from individuals' social connections plays a positive role in encouraging civic and political activity (for examples, see Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1991; Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Newton, 1997). More specifically, the findings in this model support scholars suggesting online networks begets online activity (Shah, Kwak & Holbert, 2001; Huysman & Wulf, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009; Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009; Ellison, Vitak, Gray & Lampe, 2014).

As with all studies, the current one includes limitations the reader should consider when interpreting results. The study does not explore the characteristics of respondents' social media networks that influence their political participation on these websites. Therefore, the study cannot claim whether the relationships were "bridging" or "bonding" connections. In addition, this study does not fully examine the extent to which respondents' social media networks are politically engaged on these websites. Thus, few (or many) respondents' online connections may have encouraged their own social media engagement. These methodological limitations provide opportunities for future research.

Individuals' online social networks can share a wealth of information, an important component of social capital. The information people share with their social networks is usually timely and relevant. For example, someone in an individuals' social network could read a news article on Google News or watch a news clip on his or her network affiliate's local news station and post it to social media. Included in this post could be a comment or opinion about the news story. An individual when seeing his or her online social media feed may feel compelled to respond to the post or engage in other expressive behavior to demonstrate political affiliations or opinions. The same interaction can take place when someone in a social media network "likes" a candidate or issue or "favorites" a post from a candidate or organization. The effect of this exposure on individuals is not trivial. As the results suggest, viewing this behavior on social media encourages individuals' own behavior, supporting research probing similar phenomenon (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril & Rojas, 2009; Skoric, Ying, & Ng, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Bode, Vraga, Borah and Shah, 2013; Greuling & Kilian, 2014).

Overall, this study provides strong empirical support for theoretical claims suggesting a largely direct relationship between the resources associated with social capital via social media and civic and political engagement online. Social media continues to be an important place for political expression, and the role of information exchange via the social media network is vital for this engagement.

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