Demographics and Internet behaviors as predictors of active publics

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study explicates online political activism (OPA); provides a short, reliable, and valid index for measuring OPA; and examines correlates that predict such active publics. A national probability sample of adult American Internet users was surveyed using random digit dialing. The study found OPA is more frequent among older, wealthier, and more liberal respondents. OPA increases with Internet self-efficacy and search engine usage.

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1. Introduction

Political public relations scholars have contributed to a growing body of research about the use and impact of digital and social media. Their research shows that digital and social media are indeed critical channels of communication for public relations practitioners, allowing direct interaction with key publics and their opinion leaders, bypassing legacy media gatekeepers (Dozier, Sha, Wellhausen, & Ray, 2009).

In the early days of digital political public relations, much hype emphasized how digital tools could connect publics directly to campaign organizations (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Tedesco, 2004). Further research confirms that digital and social media do provide publics with powerful tools to shift from latent to aware to active publics. Activist publics often spring up overnight online, as an organic response to organizational missteps, causing migraines for practitioners. However, despite growing research on publics and activism, few studies have provided a profile of online politically active publics.

Campaign managers and staffers use digital and social media to mobilize support (Bor, 2014; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Gueorguieva, 2008). Political public relations practitioners search for effective ways to influence voters. They also seek a better understanding of online political advocates who shape voter attitudes (Lawrence, 2010). Such searches have resulted in mixed outcomes.

Following the classic S-curve for the diffusion and adoption of innovations (Rogers, 2003), research reveals greater use of social media with each election cycle. Studies of adoption (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; Purcell & Rainie, 2014, 2012) and political motivations (Kaye & Johnson, 2002) indicate that some constituents use online tools with such frequency that

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they can be termed online political activists. Younger cohorts actively use social networking sites to talk about their political preferences with greater frequency than older adults (Rainie, 2012; Sweetser, Lariscy, & Tinkham, 2012). Yet, Dozier et al. (2009) argued that – while younger people may be more innovative – they nevertheless are not as involved and engaged in traditional forms of political activism as older people.

2. Literature review

The situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1989, 1997, 2003; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) provides the theoretical foundation for the present study. This study profiles and explores predictors of active publics in political public relations. According to Grunig's schema, *latent* publics face some kind of problem, but are not aware of it. *Aware* publics recognize a problem, but do not act on it. *Active* publics, the focus of the present study, consist of those who recognize the problem and take some kind of action. Specifically, the present study is concerned with those who use digital and social media as tools for political action. Who are they? What demographic characteristics and Internet attitudes and behaviors predict such digital political action?

2.1. An overview of digital political public relations

In the early days of digital political public relations, campaign organizations could easily discount the benefits technology afforded their campaigns (Sweetser, 2011). Tedesco (2004) noted early campaign websites were nothing more than online brochures, indicating an adherence to the one-way communication model that lacked original or targeted content. Bimber and Davis (2003) suggested that this early use of online content was simply a means to reinforce messages communicated through other traditional channels. Campaign communication staff seemed reticent to truly embrace the technology. Scholars like Stromer-Galley (2000) reported that campaigns did the bare minimum with online sites, in order to retain what they perceived as control over the campaign.

Online campaigning has evolved from its hesitant start in 1992 into a fully ubiquitous tool in the 21st century. However, the initial negative perspective among campaigners toward social media sites continued through several campaign cycles (Sweetser, 2011). Even though Pew Internet and American Life data showed greater adoption of the Internet as a means for information gathering and political discourse (Sweetser, 2011), Stromer-Galley and Baker (2006) argued that campaign websites were more of a dialogic façade than a true medium for two-way communication.

Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) examined candidate-constituent benefits from a political public relations standpoint. They found that online discourse among supporters could lead to local grassroots activities, as occurred among Obama supporters in 2008. In related research, Gueorguieva (2008) asserted that social network sites created an inexpensive venue for fundraising efforts and organizing volunteers during a 2005 election.

2.2. Online political activism (OPA)

A number of different concepts have been applied to the study of political activism, from civic engagement to political participation. Political activism is often described as the activities citizens undertake to influence the structure and selection of government (Putnam, 2000). Himelbiom, Lariscy, Tinkham, and Sweetser (2012) argued that this traditional definition tends to exclude political activities conducted online. Smith (2013) found that 49% of Americans took part in some sort of civic activity. Additionally, 39% of those same active adults took part in political activities online (Smith, 2013). Likewise, Bucy and colleagues (Bucy, 2005; Bucy, D'Angelo, & Newhagen, 1999; Bucy & Gregson, 2001) proposed the *media participation hypothesis*, arguing that involvement online could actually be perceived as a form of political participation. Pew Internet and American Life Project reported higher-than-ever political talk and activism in social spaces (Rainie, 2012). Not only did 22% of registered voters announce their vote choice for president on social media sites (Rainie, 2012), a reported 30% of Americans said that they had been encouraged in social spaces to support a particular candidate. Twenty percent of respondents said that they had actively used sites like Facebook or Twitter to encourage others to vote (Rainie, 2012). Non-traditional activities – such as building solitary – and private activities – such as reading a blog post or searching for candidate information online – were treated as behaviors similar to wearing a campaign t-shirt or door-to-door canvassing (Himelbiom et al., 2012; Sweetser et al., 2012; Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011).

Lazarsfeld and Merton (2004) concept of the *narcotizing dysfunction* of media consumption runs counter the *media participation hypothesis*. Briefly, Lazarsfeld and Merton argued that the simple consumption of large quantities of information about social and political issues might actually substitute for social/political actions. We reconsider these theories in Section 5, based on the findings reported in this study.

2.3. Situational theory of publics

The situational theory of publics provides a theoretical foundation and practical tool for segmenting the general population into nonpublics, latent publics, aware publics, and active publics (Grunig, 1989, 1997, 2003; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Pertinent to the present study are *active publics*: groups of people that communicate actively and organize to resolve an issue, because they problematize an existing issue (e.g., legalization of marijuana), see few obstacles that prevent them from