



Leveling or tilting the playing field: Social networking sites and offline political communication inequality



Jaeho Cho^{a,1}, Heejo Keum^{b,*}

^a Department of Communication, University of California, 1 Shields Ave., Davis, CA 95616, USA

^b Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, Sungkyunkwan University, 50505 First Faculty Hall, 25-2 Sungkyunkwan-Ro, Jongno-Gu, Seoul, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

Building on a resource theory, this study investigates (a) how individuals' socio-economic status is related to political communication in offline situations and on social networking sites and (b) whether political expression on SNS improves socio-economic stratification in offline political discussion. Analyses of a national survey demonstrate that the impact of individuals' socio-economic status (SES) is much weaker on political expression via SNS than on offline political discussion. It is also found that the political use of SNS reduces the strength of the link between individuals' SES and offline discussion. Implications of these findings for the Internet and political inequality are discussed.

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1. Introduction

One common observation in American politics is that citizens from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly less vocal in the governing process than the more affluent (Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Stockemer, 2014; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). This inequality worries scholars because it leads to unbalanced government responsiveness and limits democratic legitimacy (Dahl, 1989; Lijphart, 1997). Verba (2003) argues, for example, “of the various ways in which US citizens can be unequal, political inequality is one of the most significant and troubling” (p. 663). Given this concern, research has sought to understand how

the inequality develops and persists and how to ameliorate it (Barber, 2001; Bonfadelli, 2002; Hargittai, 2008a; Krueger, 2002; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010). In this context, the exponential growth of Web-based political activities over the past decade raises questions about what the Internet brings to long-standing political inequality (Boulianne, 2009 for a meta analysis).

Building on this research, the present study expands the context of political inequality to include citizen political communication and investigates whether and how political expression on social networking sites (SNS) ameliorates discussion deficit among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, similar to the pattern of socio-economic stratification in participation, face-to-face political discussion is unevenly distributed in the population, with those with higher socio-economic statuses (SES) being more active than their low status counterparts (Fraser, 1992; Young, 1996). The gap in political discussion is not just a matter of communication. Given that political

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +82 2 760 0689.

E-mail addresses: jaecho@ucdavis.edu (J. Cho), hkeum@skku.edu (H. Keum).

¹ Tel.: +1 530 754 0975.

discussion is essential to citizen competence and participation (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Mansbridge, 1999; Marques & Maia, 2010), this communicative inequality implies a socio-economic stratification in a basic and fundamental feature of democratic citizenship. Relative to the participation gap, however, the issue of communication gap has received little attention in the literature. Recognizing this, we examine whether political communication on SNS is stratified by socio-economic status and whether the SNS use ameliorates the discussion deficit among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. By shifting the focus from formal participatory activity to citizens' communicative engagement, the present study adds another layer to the discussion of political inequality.

Another contribution of this study to the literature is that it provides a direct empirical examination of the possibility that online political behavior narrows offline political inequality. Although much discussed, this possibility has rarely been tested in previous research. Indeed, past studies have largely focused on the relationship between SES and online political engagement. A positive link is considered an indication of participatory inequality online while a non-significant association is interpreted as evidence toward equality (Krueger, 2002; Schlozman et al., 2010). Although non-stratified political engagement online has the potential to improve political inequality offline, it remains untested. The present study fills this gap in the literature by testing whether citizens' political use of SNS influences the associations between their socio-economic status and their offline political discussions.

In the sections that follow, this study builds on a resource theory to discuss how individuals' SES is related to political communication in their offline lifeworld and in their computer-mediated social space. Next, we predict that the impact of SES on political communication will differ depending on the mode of communication. We further discuss how political expression via SNS reduces the extent to which SES is related to everyday face-to-face political discussion. We then turn to the 2012 Pew Internet & American Life Project data to empirically examine our theoretical discussions.

1.1. Socio-economic status and offline political discussion

Early studies find that individuals' socio-economic status is a strong predictor of political participation (Lane, 1959; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1971). Although this research successfully identifies likely voters, the question as to why structural characteristics exert such influence is never fully answered. Later work searches more carefully for explanatory mechanisms underlying the socio-economic stratification of participation, which culminates in a civic voluntarism model (Verba et al., 1995). The work by Verba and colleagues specifies three factors as accounting for participation—direct resources such as time, money, and civic skills; psychological engagement with politics; and networks of political recruitment. The model suggests that citizens' voices are unequal because the resources that facilitate political participation are not equally distributed across the population. High SES citizens, as compared to their low SES counterparts, tend to be

more interested and better versed in political issues, have more opportunities to develop organizing and communications skills, and have more access to social networks where civic and political engagement is the norm. The resources and opportunities disproportionately available to those in the higher socio-economic strata make political participation more affordable and feasible for them than for others in lower strata.

The likelihood of political discussion is also largely explained by the resources necessary to participate in the political process. Individual resources like civic skills and psychological engagement with politics foster political discussion. Likewise, spare time (Nie & Hillygus, 2002; Putnam, 1995; cf. Robinson & Haan, 2006) and social networks (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) are necessary conditions for political discussion to occur. Especially, given the interpersonal nature of political discussion, the availability of discussants geared for political talk is crucial (Sinclair, 2012). Because these individual-level and social-level resources are concentrated amongst high SES citizens, everyday political conversation, as in the case of participation, is more likely to occur among those in the higher strata (Fraser, 1992; Young, 1996). This SES-based explanation of communication gap has been recognized in the literature of political communication. The knowledge gap hypothesis, for example, posits that individuals' SES is systematically associated with interpersonal discussion on public affairs issues, which ultimately leads to a knowledge gap (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970). Tichenor et al. (1970) note, "education generally indicates a broader sphere of everyday activity, a greater number of reference groups, and more interpersonal contacts, which increase the likelihood of discussing public affairs topics with others" (p. 162). A communication mediation model by McLeod et al. (2001) also illustrates how individuals' socio-economic position is related to political discussion. Citizens with higher education and income tend to be more active than others in using news media, which in turn spurs political conversation (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005). Taken together, the resource theory and related literature suggest that socio-economic advantages translate into information and communication advantages, which leads to the following hypothesis:

H1. Individuals' socio-economic status will be positively related to the frequency of political discussion.

1.2. Socio-economic status and political expression on SNS

Over the past decade, SNS have quickly gained popularity at all SES levels. According to the 2012 Pew Internet and American Life Survey, two thirds of Internet users use a social networking site of some kind and these SNS users are not stratified by levels of education or income (Hargittai, 2008b). Among Internet users, SNS adoption is almost equal between those with a "high school education or less" (66%) and those with a "college degree or above" (65%). Similarly, adoption rate does not increase with levels of household income. Rather, use of SNS is more common among Internet users with annual

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