



How individual sensitivities to disagreement shape youth political expression on Facebook



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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites like Facebook increasingly shape youth engagement with politics, but less is known about the factors that shape willingness to engage in political interaction on the site. This study combines twenty in-depth interviews with a survey of young adults to examine how individual predispositions, perceptions of the Facebook political climate, and network characteristics shape attitudes and behaviors toward posting political content on Facebook. Our results suggest that predispositions like political interest and conflict avoidance create distinct “sensitivities” to Facebook’s political climate and the potential for contentious political disagreement that condition willingness to post about politics.

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1. Introduction

On Election Day 2012, more than nine million Facebook users clicked an “I voted” button, telling their friends they had participated in the election (Bakshy, 2012a). More than a third of Americans who use social networking sites (SNS) report using them to like or promote materials related to politics and social issues, with 34% posting or commenting on these topics (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). Facebook use is linked to increased social capital and political participation (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison, & Lampe, 2011), the potential for incidental exposure to news and political information (Bode, 2012; Kim, 2011; Valenzuela, 2013), and may even serve as a space for political conversation and deliberation (Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010; Thorson, Vraga, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2014). In addition, there is growing evidence for normatively positive effects stemming from online political expression itself (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Östman & Ekström, 2013).

Scholarly attention has focused more on the outcomes of political uses of SNS rather than exploring what motivates such uses (though see Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011; Bumgarner, 2007 on motivations for SNS use in general). These are important questions to ask because Facebook is a distinct social setting for political talk. On the one hand, the size and relative diversity of

Facebook information flows could produce exposure to new ideas, spurring engagement and interest (Bakshy, 2012b; Bode, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). On the other hand, heterogeneity in offline discussion networks often limits political conversation, primarily because of social pressures to preserve harmony (Eliasoph, 1998; Festinger & Thibaut, 1951; Mutz, 2006). Facebook takes discussion heterogeneity to a new level, as compared to most offline social settings. The audience for a political post on Facebook combines people from multiple social spheres of one’s life and, because content posted to SNS can be copied, shared, and spread widely or could be hidden from some friends by a news feed display algorithm, the “real” audience on Facebook is indeterminate (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to explore why some young citizens post about politics on Facebook and others do not. In doing so, we consider but also push beyond the most obvious answer—political interest—to show how individual characteristics interact with perceptions of the Facebook political climate to shape willingness to engage on the site. We use a mixed method approach, heeding calls for wider utilization of “methodological pluralism” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 15) to achieve a richer understanding of our research questions through the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Cresswell & Clark, 2006). We draw first on twenty in-depth interviews with 18–29 year olds during the 2012 election cycle, probing variation among youth in their perceptions of the political climate on Facebook and exploring how these perceptions shape willingness to talk about politics on the site. In study two, we draw on a convenience sample survey of young adults to test a series of hypotheses emergent from the

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qualitative analysis about the role of individual sensitivities in predicting engagement.

1.1. The social settings for political talk

A great deal of attention has been paid to the conditions that facilitate the emergence of political talk, and, in particular, to the conditions that enable the “cross-cutting” talk that permits exposure to multiple viewpoints on political issues (Mutz, 2006). Research produces mixed results about the extent to which citizens talk about politics and how different social settings shape the content of those conversations (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; McClurg, 2006; Wyatt, Kim, & Katz, 2000). Some ethnographic studies find that political talk is relatively rare and often difficult (Eliasoph, 1998), while others find that rates of casual political talk are quite high (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987; Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999).

Part of the reason for this discrepancy is that different kinds of social settings are more or less favorable to political talk. Social pressures to preserve harmony and norms of politeness that urge people to just “get along” mean that bringing up politics can seem like a risky act, especially under conditions of opinion or partisan heterogeneity (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Kloststad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013; Mutz, 2006). Despite the fact that many theories of democracy identify exposure to multiple viewpoints as central to democratic practice, heterogeneity in discussion networks is frequently identified as a negative predictor of political talk (Kloststad et al., 2013), and, in some forms, can suppress political participation and create higher levels of opinion ambivalence (Knoke, 1990; Mutz, 2006; Nir, 2011).

Most of what we know about heterogeneity and discussion networks comes from studies of face-to-face social groups and interest driven online communities (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009; although see Kim, 2011). Despite a great deal of scholarship concerning activist uses of SNS (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; van Laer & van Aelst, 2010), there has been little research to explore how SNS function as settings for everyday political talk. In what follows, we offer a brief review of how sites like Facebook compare to more well-understood contexts for political conversation.

1.2. Heterogeneity, disagreement, and political interaction on Facebook

Scholars studying social network sites (SNS) have identified several ways in which SNS differ from most everyday forms of offline social interaction. First, expression on SNS involves addressing a “networked public” (boyd, 2010), characterized by persistence (expressions are archived), replicability (content can be duplicated), scalability (content can be made visible beyond its initial audience) and searchability (archived content can be found via search). The networked audience on Facebook combines friends and acquaintances from different social spheres, and this “context collapse” creates potentially uncomfortable tension from the intersection of these competing contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Although Facebook friend networks tend to map closely to offline social networks, individuals from different parts of that network—friends, family, work colleagues, distant acquaintances—may all be part of the audience for any post to the site.

Second, political content flows through Facebook are more heterogeneous than those that characterize most offline social networks (Kim, 2011; Pew, 2012). As Huckfeldt and Sprague (1987) observed in studying flows of political content in offline social networks, the supply of political discussion in one's environment is not fully under individual control. Heterogeneity on Facebook is related to two features of the site: (1) individuals are unlikely to

select Facebook friends on the basis of shared political opinions and (2) the proliferation of loose ties (e.g., people we are not particularly close to who populate our Facebook friends), both of which limit the possibility for de facto selective exposure based on shared background and ideals (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Third, the above-mentioned affordances of Facebook mean that the imagined audience for any given post is not only potentially heterogeneous and context collapsed, but the extent of this heterogeneity is impossible to determine (Litt, 2012). The networked audience combines features of the unknown “broadcast” audience with features of more personal audiences like a group of friends at dinner or work colleagues out for a drink (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This in turn creates pressures on strategies for impression management (Rui & Stefanone, 2013).

1.3. Young citizens and perceptions of the Facebook political climate

The brief review above offers reasons to wonder how young citizens will navigate political expression in the Facebook context. Although survey-based studies suggest that during a highly politicized time, most young citizens will be exposed to at least some political content through the site (Rainie et al., 2012), we know much less about how imaginings of a heterogeneous audience, the potential for risking exposure to those who may disagree with your political opinions, and the thought of speaking to a context collapsed audience shape decisions to post political content and what kinds of political content to post.

We explore these questions first through in-depth interviews with young citizens. In addition to the questions about heterogeneity, disagreement, and audience raised above, our research questions were also developed with an eye to bridging two distinct traditions in the study of political talk. First, we consider how perceptions of political climate—not simply the presence of disagreement, but also the amount and tone of political discussion—shape willingness to talk about politics on the site (Kim et al., 1999; Noelle-Neumann, 1984). Second, we explore how perceptions of political interaction on Facebook are shaped by individual differences. Previous studies have shown that, as Hayes et al. note, “non-participation is, at least in part, a social psychological phenomenon” (p. 261; also Matthes, 2013). Our second goal is therefore to explore whether and how perceptions of politics on Facebook depend on individual motivational and personality characteristics.

RQ1: How did young citizens perceive the Facebook political climate (the amount and tone of political discussion) during the 2012 elections?

RQ2: How do perceptions of the political climate shape young people's willingness to express themselves politically on the site?

RQ3: How are individual differences among respondents related to their willingness to express themselves politically on Facebook?

2. Study 1

2.1. Study 1 materials and methods

We developed a semi-structured, Facebook-aided interview protocol in which questions about life history, media use, and political engagement were combined with a review of the participant's Facebook profile and news feed. We conducted interviews with twenty 18–29 year olds (11 females, 9 males, mean age = 22.3). We used purposive sampling in two locations on the

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