



Differential and interactive influences on political participation by different types of news activities and political conversation through social media



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether three different types of news activities (i.e., news reception, news following, and news dissemination) and political conversation via social media have differential and interactive relationships on political participation. Analyses of survey data of social media users revealed that political conversation via social media was positively associated with political participation. Moreover, political conversation moderated the relationships among the three types of news activities and participation. Effects of news activities on political participation increased with the frequency with which people talked about politics on social media.

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1. Introduction

Social media present new opportunities for citizens to engage with news and to participate in political processes. When used for political purposes, social media contribute to various types of participatory behaviors such as conventional political participation (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), protests (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012) and political consumerism (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014).

The significance of social media as news outlets and venues for political discourse draws upon multiple and distinctive features provided by social networking sites (SNSs). As a news source, social media provide a flexible and multiple means to receive news from members of one's network as well as from news organizations and journalists (Weeks & Hobert, 2013). Social media also grant an active role to users because they can participate in news circulation by disseminating or sharing news (Singer, 2014). In addition, due to intimate relationships among network members, social media can function as effective platform for citizens to talk about political issues and events with others (Choi, 2014).

Although social media offer various functions that potentially foster political participation, previous studies have not fully addressed how distinct aspects of use of social media differently influence individuals' participatory behaviors. To address this limitation, this study examines whether different types of news activities have differential effects on political participation. These activities include news reception (i.e., receiving news from one's network members), news following (i.e., following the accounts of news sources in SNSs), and news dissemination through SNSs.

In addition, this study investigates how each of these three types of social media news activities interacts with SNS-mediated political conversation to facilitate political participation. News use and interpersonal political talk have been suggested as two main communication variables that work together to evoke political participation (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Prior research based on differential gains model has shown that effects of news use on participation rely on how frequently people talk with others about news and politics (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Scheufele, 2002). This study investigates whether this moderating role of political conversation holds true in a social media context. Survey data of social media users were used to test whether different types of social media news activities and SNS-mediated political conversation have differential and interactive effects on political participation.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Types of news activities in social media

Social media represent a relatively new option for news consumption and political engagement. Although getting news may not be a main motive for most people who visit SNSs, many users still obtain news through social media (Glynn, Huges, & Hoffman, 2012). In a recent U.S. survey, about half of Facebook or Twitter users got news from those sites (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014). Accordingly, news media try to capitalize on the new opportunity to attract an audience by incorporating features of social media into their process of news production and dissemination (Gleason, 2010; Sreenivasan, 2010).

Typically, news reception via social media happens as one receives news pieces or hyperlinks from other members of a social network. While this type of news exposure tends to happen incidentally rather than purposefully (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014), users can also establish regular patterns of news consumption by connecting with specific news organizations and journalists. Weeks and Hobert (2013) termed this routine news consumption “news friending” which occurs when one signs up to friend or follow accounts of mainstream news media in SNSs. Compared with news reception, news following is less frequently practiced: among SNS users who get news online, about one quarter reportedly get their news by following news organizations and individual reporters (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010).

Furthermore, social media provide users with more active engagement with news than simply receiving and following it. Instead of being limited to a recipient role, users of social media can participate in dissemination of news and political information. News sharing by posting news or hyperlinks in one’s SNSs manifests this type of user activity in social media environments. News sharing undermines the traditional gate-keeping role of mainstream media by redirecting and redistributing information from mainstream media. News dissemination causes the news experience to be *social*, because members within a network mutually influence each other’s judgment of news value (Singer, 2014), and at the same time it allows news circulation to become *viral* to spread rapidly and widely on individuals’ networks (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Social media also serve as venues for political conversation, thereby offering opportunities to express and exchange political views, and to deliberate on political issues and topics in the process. Compared with the static and asynchronous interaction that is common in other Internet-based platforms such as email and discussion boards, social media facilitate more active conversation (Choi, 2014). Political talk in social media can happen as a part of mundane interaction in natural contexts, similar to face-to-face situations (Neuman, Bimber, & Hindman, 2011). Political conversation in social media may engage people due to established relationships among conversational partners within a network. To summarize, social media provide users with diverse and integrative opportunities to engage in news and politics. However, few studies have examined whether types of news activities and political conversation via social media exert distinct and interactive effects on participation.

2.2. Social media and political participation

Researchers have explored the role of new media technologies on the public’s civic and political engagement. One important lesson from prior research is that the contribution of new media technologies to civic life depends on users’ individual characteristics as well as on the technologies’ ability to increase the availability of

information (Bimber, 2001; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Xenos & Moy, 2007). The growing availability of news and information can foster people’s political participation by reducing the information cost required for participation (Bimber, 2001). Similarly, social media can promote citizen participation by providing mobilizing information from multiple sources, and helping to recruit participants into political action and to coordinate participatory acts (Harlow, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012).

However, prior research notes that information availability cannot be a sufficient condition to produce political outcomes. Based on a psychological approach, scholars have discovered that an individual’s ability and motivation serve as key mediating or moderating factors in the association between information and participation. Information-processing ability not only facilitates individual’s knowledge acquisition from news media (Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970) but also positively influences participatory behaviors (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). Moreover, an individual’s motive for information acquisition elicits information seeking, which enhances the individual’s participation. Use of new media for informational and political purposes contributes to people’s engagement in politics (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Shah et al., 2001). These studies suggest that motives behind news activities on social media may differently affect political participation.

However, findings from previous research regarding the role of social media for political engagement are quite mixed. Some studies discovered positive relationships between social media use and political participation (Bode et al., 2014; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), but others found no relationship (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). These inconsistent findings may arise from distinct conceptualization and measurement of political use of social media. SNS use has been measured in different ways, such as utility of SNS use for news (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), SNS use for political reasons (Bode et al., 2014), reception of news from SNSs (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010), and attention to social media for political information (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

In this respect, the research by Dimitrova et al. (2014) on the differential effects of digital media on political participation provides a useful theoretical insight for the current study. They suggest that different types of digital media serve for distinct political functions and involve varying levels of user involvement, which should yield different political outcomes. According to their study, compared with news websites, social media use as a better means for political connection and mobilization had a stronger relationship with political participation. Although their study emphasized SNSs’ mobilizing function relative to news website, their theorization can be extended to explore the potentially different functions of distinct types of social media use for political engagement.

News engagement in social media includes various types of activities, which involve potentially varying levels of user motivation and involvement. First, news reception in social media does not necessarily entail strong motivation to seek out information, because this type of reception tends to happen in an incidental rather than purposeful fashion. For example, about 78% of Facebook users encounter news as a byproduct while visiting the site for other purposes, and those who arrive at news web sites through Facebook tend to stay for much less time and to view fewer pages than visitors who come to the sites directly (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014).

Conversely, news following and news dissemination via social media are more goal-directed than is passive news reception. Following news in social media manifests a user’s intention to establish and maintain a formal relationship with certain news outlets or reporters to receive a regular flow of news (Weeks & Hobert,

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