Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

Some of these things are not like the others: Examining motivations and political predispositions among political Facebook activity

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Political engagement via social media has evolved, and web sites including Facebook continue to be a place for individuals, especially young ones, to engage politically. Because politics on social media is diverse, it makes sense that the reasons for participating in it vary. In addition, because current events information and political news is accessible via social media, the role of attention to traditional news sources in this type of political engagement is debatable. The study takes up the opportunity to address these questions by examining young people's attention to television, print, and online news, their engagement with four Facebook political activities, and their psychological motivations for using the website politically just prior to the 2012 U.S. Presidential election. The results suggest that the primary motivations for using Facebook politically are not universal, and indeed vary by activity. They revolve around connecting with others socially, sharing information with others, and presenting oneself to others. In addition, attention to offline and online news largely do not matter. The study moves research forward by describing the variety of psychological predispositions some Facebook users bring to their political engagement with the web site, and how these predispositions vary across different Facebook political behavior.

1. Introduction

Individuals continue to use social media politically. Over a third of social media users engage in a variety of political activities on these sites, including "Liking" or promoting political content, encouraging people to vote, posting thoughts on political and social issues, reposting someone else's political content, and encouraging people to take action on political or social issues (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). In addition, young people are most likely to take up these opportunities (2012). Because political engagement via social media continues to be an important way for individuals, especially young ones, to engage in the political sphere, research probing the nuances of this phenomenon is essential. Although a healthy amount of research already exists, there are areas for expansion.

For instance, because political social media use can vary, it is important to uncover the motivations for different political activities. Doing so may shed light on the different types of people using social media politically, and can shed light upon the unique affordances of political engagement on the website, for both citizens and political elites. More specifically, we may begin to understand the extent to which individuals' psychological predispositions for social interaction, information seeking and sharing, and self-presentation matter. In addition, although social media participation has become more common for some individuals, it may be useful to explore how information seeking, political attitudes, and other forms of political engagement relate. Because social media participation varies regarding the resources needed to participate (i.e., knowledge, interest) and the nature of the activities (e.g., time, interactivity), it makes sense that individuals' informational and political predispositions may play different roles in spurring such behavior. Specifically, it may be that those politically interested and generally engaged take up certain opportunities, while those not involved in politics participate in others. Overall, exploring these questions affords scholars and political actors the opportunity to gain a robust understanding regarding the reasons for why individuals visit social media for political purposes, paying attention to specific interactions with these web sites. The current study addresses these questions using survey data of college students obtained just prior to the 2012 United States general election.

2. Literature review

2.1. Political social media use

At the turn of the century, scholars recognized the potential role of the internet in politics. Bimber (2003) argued that the net affor-

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ded unprecedented amounts of information availability, subsequently altering the organizational structure of politics to become less centralized and bureaucratic. However, because the internet allows individuals an abundance of information opportunities, people are more likely to seek out information that suits their interests at the cost of avoiding other types of information (Bimber, 2003; Prior, 2007). This potentially leads to a "Daily Me," in which clusters of individuals form based on shared interests and beliefs, leading to fragmentation (Sunstein, 2007). Xenos and Moy (2007) demonstrated that the psychological approach, or the notion that the role of online information on civic and political engagement is influenced by political interest, is the appropriate way to approach these relationships. In other words, it makes sense that those who are generally interested and engaged in the political sphere may use the internet to supplement their participation. Although the psychological approach may be appropriate, social media's unique affordances may expand on and perhaps challenge this idea. Participatory media alters the ways in which individuals can communicate and socialize with each other. These changes can have significant civic and political impacts for certain types of people, due to individuals' ability to collaborate online and produce and share content (Rheingold, 2008).

Initial accounts suggested social media's role in politics involved its affordability for low-cost candidate exposure and the ability to reach out to voters for donations and support (Gueorguieva, 2008). Furthermore, social media allows candidates to reach out to those less interested in politics, and individuals perceive candidates as more favorably when candidates engage with them on these sites (Utz, 2009). To be sure, however, these media also offer interactive ways in which individuals can participate politically, first illustrated during the 2008 U.S. election cycle. For example, individuals engaged with the Facebook "walls" of 2008 Presidential candidates. Even though many people posted only once, the more individuals posted, the more loquacious their comments (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010). Notably, the verboseness of Facebook wall posting may vary during different political climates, as those who wrote messages on candidates' walls during the 2006 mid-term election cycle did so shallowly (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Nevertheless, Facebook provides a source for diverse forms of political engagement, and it seems that some people, especially young ones, do engage in a variety of activities on the website (Vitak et al., 2011). Other sites like YouTube also encourage political interaction, in part, due to the website's broadcasting of Presidential candidate debates. During the 2008 debates, YouTube offered a space in which individuals could deliberate with others by sharing opinions and interacting with the debates themselves (Kirk & Schill, 2011).

As time has progressed, social media continues to play an important role in politics. Although, for example, some people may still not always draw connections between social media, government, and politics, they do recognize that is can be useful to get government and political information (Bridges, Appel, & Grossklags, 2012). In addition, using social media encourages support for democratic values such as freedom of expression (Swigger, 2012). In addition to Facebook and YouTube, Twitter has emerged as a tool for both politicians and citizens. Some political candidates use it primarily as an information-sharing tool, but usually do not "retweet" or use "hashtags" (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). For citizens, it is especially affective for those who perceive a high social presence of political candidates on the site (Lee & Shin, 2012).

Overall, research has demonstrated political social media use has evolved from a recruitment and donation tool for candidates to one that is more interactive and expressive for citizens. Different social media offer different opportunities to engage politically, and individuals are increasingly taking up those opportunities. The variety of political interactions afforded by social media suggests that individuals may bring different psychological motivations and expectations when they visit these sites for political purposes. In addition, because this engagement requires varying degrees of interactivity and political resources, the role of individuals' political behavior, political attitudes, and information seeking may differ. The current study focuses on the motivations for Facebook political use, because the site is immensely popular and affords individuals a variety of ways to engage politically. According to the site, there are one billion active monthly users as of October 2012,[1] and on Election Day, November 6, 2012, Facebook tracked 71.7 million election-related mentions within the United States.[2] The following section details the motivations for using this popular website.

2.2. Motivations for Facebook use

A substantial amount of research has examined the predictors and motivations for using social network sites, including Facebook. These studies suggest the motivations are diverse. On one hand, Facebook users tend to be more generally socially active than non-users and are "sensation-seekers," but they are not necessarily satisfied with life and close with their peers (Sheldon, 2012). Similarly, they are extroverts open to new experiences and perhaps somewhat less confident emotionally (Correa, Willard Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010; Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012). However, those who are shy may also use Facebook and feel good about doing so, but have less social connections on the site (Orr et al., 2009). In addition, gender may matter, with females engaging in more Facebook activity and exerting more energy maintaining their profile and surveying others' profiles (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012).

For the relatively few who do *not* use sites like Facebook, a lack of motivation, a perception as a poor use of time, a preference towards other forms of communication and activities, a concern regarding cyber-safety, and a dislike of online self-presentation may play a role (Baker & White, 2011). Conversely, individuals who do use the site do so for different reasons, but primarily to survey others, entertain themselves, be recognized, seek emotional support, extend social networks, and maintain existing social networks (Zhang, Tang, & Leung, 2011). Those who have a tendency to express themselves "honestly" in general online behavior use Facebook to establish new and terminate existing relationships (Tosun, 2012). In addition, self-expression and sharing information are also important uses for using Facebook, especially for young people (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). In fact, people likely publicize more information on social media like Facebook than in person, yet it is extroverts, rather than introverts, who do so (Chen & Marcus, 2012). Still, the publicized "self" on Facebook may be highly selective, socially desirable, and represent the "self" individuals aspire for "offline" (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Indeed, it may be that users disclose only a fraction of all possible information, and they disclose less over time (Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010).

Because Facebook affords a variety of uses, scholars have begun to probe the ways in which psychological motivations relate to different types of engagement with the site. For example, a social interaction motivation for visiting Facebook is related to writing comments, posting on walls, writing private messages, chatting, and using groups. However, certain motivations, but not others, spur specific Facebook activity. Visiting Facebook to pass time is related only to wall posting, and visiting the site for entertainment is related only to writing comments. In addition, a sharing informa-

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[1] Taken from http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts.
[2] Taken from http://newsroom.fb.com/News/530/2012-Election-Activity-on-Facebook.