



Social media as a catalyst for online deliberation? Exploring the affordances of Facebook and YouTube for political expression

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 17 November 2012

Keywords:

Computer-mediated communication
Facebook
Online deliberation
SIDE theory
Social media
YouTube

ABSTRACT

This manuscript aims to assess the potential of social media as a channel to foster democratic deliberation. It does this by examining whether the types of discussions that citizens maintain in two of the most used social media channels managed by the White House – Facebook and YouTube – meet the necessary conditions for deliberative democracy. For this purpose 7230 messages were analyzed and assessed in terms of indicators developed to evaluate online discourse derived from the work of Habermas. By contrasting social media channels that differ in the affordances of identifiability and networked information access (two traditional predictors of online deliberation), we seek to contribute a deeper understanding of social media and its impact on deliberation. Drawing on the social identification/deindividuation (SIDE) model of computer mediated communication and network theories, we predict that political discussions in Facebook will present a more egalitarian distribution of comments between discussants and higher level of politeness in their messages. Consistent with our theoretical framework, results confirm that Facebook expands the flow of information to other networks and enables more symmetrical conversations among users, whereas politeness is lower in the more anonymous and deindividuated YouTube.

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1. Introduction

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been seen as mechanisms for increasing collaborative communication between the government and the public, especially in the past decade as democratic systems have become increasingly decentralized, interdependent and linked by new information technologies (Chadwick, 2008). Internet advocates have traditionally claimed that the Web can potentially improve democratic practices by connecting citizens through virtual networks and communities of interest, allowing users to participate in collaborative platforms that facilitate increased information flow and diversity of opinion, and even make government decisions more expertly-informed and democratic (Noveck, 2009). In the last 10 years, user-generated content has become increasingly popular on the Web. More and more people today participate in content creation, rather than just consumption. The label “social media” has been attached to the growing number of Web 2.0 websites or services whose content is primarily user-driven, such as blogs, social network sites, micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter), and digital media sharing formats (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008).

Further, the use of these applications by federal agencies has become a growth phenomenon in the United States. The State

Department implemented a social network site that facilitates discussions about cultural exchange programs in the online virtual community known as Second Life, the Federal Emergency Management Agency now allows YouTube subscribers to comment on its disaster response, and the Army’s website even includes a virtual recruiter, confirming the increasing tendency of government agencies to rely on networked technologies to communicate and engage with the public (Norton & Citron, 2010). Indeed, several scholars have claimed that a new category for e-government, Citizen-to-Citizen (C2C), should be considered to incorporate the relationships between citizens that develop through the communication channels afforded by governments (Yildiz, 2007).

Little is known, however, about the role of increasingly popular social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube in promoting online political discussion. The goal of this manuscript is twofold. First, we explore which messages posted by the White House successfully initiate conversations among users and whether factors recognized by previous research on online deliberation such as group size, volume of communication, interactivity between participants and type and content of messages have the same impact on user participation in social network sites (SNSs). Second, we argue that SNSs possess different affordances (Gibson, 1986) that shape discussion networks and influence deliberation in different ways. We focus on two particular affordances – identifiability and networked information access, two traditional predictors of online deliberation – by comparing political discussion in two

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social media channels that differ in these affordances, namely Facebook and YouTube.

Drawing on the social identification/deidentification effects (SIDEs) model (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995), we predict that the greater identifiability in Facebook will lead to greater politeness than the more anonymous YouTube. Drawing on social network theory, and based on the greater networked information access provided to Facebook users (in the form of automatic updates to users' networks when content is generated), we predict that Facebook political discussions will be characterized by more egalitarian distribution of comments among discussants due to the greater information flow to social networks beyond those involved in the immediate discussion. In this way, we expect our findings to contribute to a deeper understanding of political deliberation in SNSs by analyzing several factors at the individual and conversational level that might affect users' responsiveness in social media accounts managed by the White House, based on the following research questions: *Do the factors recognized by previous research on online political discussion affect the quality of deliberation observed in social media? How do different social media affordances shape discussion networks and influence deliberation?*

1.1. Defining deliberation

Traditionally, political discussion has been considered a key factor in societal consensus-building (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002), since it increases tolerance, highlights opportunities for involvement and encourages engagement in public life (Walsh, 2004). Although there are many different ways to conceptualize deliberation, in the last few decades scholars from different research traditions have included in their definitions at least two common ideas: the concept of a genre or form of communication characterized by "the performance of a set of communicative behaviors that promote thorough group discussion" (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002, p. 400), and the notion that in this process of communication the individuals involved weigh carefully the reasons for and against some of the propositions presented by others (Gastil, 2000; Schudson, 1997).

Habermas (1989), in one of the most referenced conceptualizations, defines deliberation as an interchange of rational-critical arguments among a group of individuals, triggered by a common or public problem, whose main focus or topic of discussion is to find a solution acceptable to all who have a stake in the issue. Additionally, scholars argue that the behavior of participants and interaction among them should meet the criteria established by the principles of political equality and egalitarian reciprocity in order to be considered within the range of deliberative discussion (Burkhalter et al., 2002; Fishkin, 1991). Consequently, for the purposes of this paper deliberation will be conceptualized as an idealized category within the broader notion of what Gastil, Chambers and other scholars call "discursive participation" (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). This refers to a particular sort of discussion between at least two individuals in which (1) the form of communication emphasizes the use of logic and reasoning instead of power or coercion, (2) this reasoned engagement focuses on a social or political issue through which participants are able to identify solutions to a common problem, and (3) individuals are open to opinions and ideas expressed by others, and at the same time the communication between them is governed by rules of equality, symmetry and civility.

1.2. Deliberation and the Internet

Since the advent of the Internet, scholars have heralded its potential to democratize communication, and more recently research has highlighted the role of social media specifically in enhancing civic participation and democratic decision-making (e.g., Lerman, 2007; Macintosh, 2004). Janssen and Kies (2005) found that online

spaces enabled decentralized communication of many-to-many since each participant is normally equally entitled to comment or raise a new question, and participants are free to express their opinions. Research has also found that the written and asynchronous characteristics of the medium may support more reflexive, rational and argumentative conversations (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2010). Others have recognized in these types of tools a more appropriate medium for deliberation than synchronous channels (Coleman & Gotze, 2001) because they provide users a tool to compose messages at their own pace, constituting a more favorable channel for a rational-critical form of debate (Dahlberg, 2001).

On the other hand, researchers have questioned whether the form of discourse fostered by computer-mediated discussions captures the benefits of the face-to-face ideal, rejecting the hypothesis that online deliberation expands the informal zone of the public sphere (Wilhelm, 1999). Several reasons have been presented by scholars to justify this stance. First, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been historically regarded as an impersonal phenomenon that deindividuates participants, encouraging uncivil discourse (flaming) and group-based stereotyping (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Papacharissi (2004) identified the absence of cues as the main condition to encourage flaming and uncivil behavior in online political discourse. Similarly, Davis (1999) found that users who participate in online discussions about politics usually make comments only in groups that agree with their own views, concluding that online deliberation mainly reinforces preexisting views by perpetuating a confirmation bias. Consequently, since online participation has been both positively and negatively related to deliberation, there is a need to clarify the dynamics involved in the uses of specifically Web 2.0-based applications for deliberation purposes. This study takes a step in that direction through the analysis of two social media channels that differ in the level of identifiability and networked information access required for participation.

1.3. Identifiability and networked information access in online deliberation

The level of *identifiability* vs. anonymity is a media affordance likely to influence the nature of online deliberation. Based on the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDEs), scholars argue that given the relative lack of social cues in CMC, individuals may find it easier to issue unpleasant decisions as they are divorced from the human consequences of their actions (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). "Deindividualization theory proposes that behavior becomes socially deregulated under conditions of anonymity and group immersion, as a result of reduced self-awareness" (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002, p. 94). According to SIDE theory, under conditions in which participants' individual identity is not salient, group norms and identity are triggered, and this in-group identity leads to stereotyping of out-group members. Similarly, in CMC contexts that allow for less exchange of social context cues, this has a depersonalizing effect that may lead to uninhibited behavior and flaming practices (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). This suggests that anonymity and deindividuation may have a negative, divisive effect on online deliberation.

Another media affordance that is likely to influence the quality of online deliberation is the level of *networked information access*. Research has shown that individual-level variables alone are insufficient for explaining civic behaviors, and that interactions within and across different types of community settings can be important catalysts for deliberation and civic action (Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004). Studies for example have consistently found a positive relationship between the size of the network in which individuals discuss civic matters and participatory

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