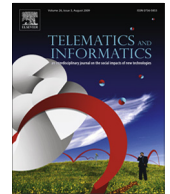




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Participatory or deliberative democracy? Exploring the mediation effects of perceived online deliberation and online interactive activities on social outcomes



Kyung Han You^a, Jeong Kyu Lee^b, Hyunjin Kang^c, Eun Go^{a,*}

^a College of Communications, The Pennsylvania State University, 115 Carnegie Building, University Park, PA 16802-5101, United States

^b Centre for Health Initiatives at University of Wollongong, Innovation Campus, ITAMS Building 233, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, NSW 2522, Australia

^c School of Management, Operations and Marketing, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, NSW 2522, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Using the structural equation modeling method ($N = 811$), this study explores the structural relationships among online news consumption, political participation and social trust, with a focus on the mediating effects of online users' deliberative perceptions and news-related online interactive activities. The analysis confirms that users' perceptions of online deliberation exert a significant mediating effect on users' levels of news consumption, political participation, and social trust. Users' interactive civic messaging behaviors, on the other hand, solely enhance participatory intentions. The findings also show that the consumption of political news and the consumption of entertainment news have different effects on users' perceptions of online deliberation, social trust, and political participation. Specifically, while political news has a direct and relatively strong influence on participation, entertainment news has a limited and indirect effect on participation. Online interactive activities are negatively associated with users' perceived competency for online deliberation. Further implications of the study are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over time, the Internet has become an important platform for the delivery of news. Indeed, a recent estimate (Pew Research Center, 2012) shows that online news consumption increased from 19% in 2000 to 46% in 2012. The great popularity of online news consumption holds tremendous promise for political participation, given that the Internet offers an open digital space in which users are able to seek information and discuss current affairs like never before. Political communication scholars have sought to explore whether this changing media landscape influences news-consumption patterns as well as how online news consumption is associated with social outcomes such as political participation and social trust.

To explain such effects, some studies have focused on the role of the Internet as a public agora that can enrich deliberative perceptions, thereby contributing to society by fostering the democratic process (e.g., Dahlberg, 2001; Sunstein, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). Other studies (e.g., Price and Cappella, 2002; Shah et al., 2005; Quintelier and Vissers, 2008) have focused on the degree to which the Internet offers opportunities for online news consumers to share ideas via diverse

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kyunghanyou@gmail.com (K.H. You), lee.jeongkyu@gmail.com (J.K. Lee), hyunjin@uow.edu.au (H. Kang), eungo83@gmail.com (E. Go).

interactive technologies, therefore indirectly encouraging political participation. While the former of these studies attributes political participation to the deliberative perceptions facilitated by news consumption, the latter of these studies attributes participation to online interactive activities employing diverse technological features and that are engaged in either during or after reading online news. Given this, the present study attempts to investigate how deliberative perceptions and online interactive activities mediate the relationship between online news consumption and the social outcomes of political participation and social trust by developing a structural model.

In addition, in terms of online news consumption, the present study attempts to examine the effects of different types of news consumption (political news and entertainment news) on civic engagement. Although many scholars have investigated the role of political news delivered online in influencing political participation and civic engagement (e.g., Shah et al., 2005), they have paid little attention to the relationship between entertainment news (“soft news”) and civic engagement because it is generally assumed that entertainment news elicits irrational and emotional responses and therefore cannot foster deliberation. However, entertainment news also has the potential for increasing political knowledge and/or changing political attitudes, especially as shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have become popular among viewers. Nonetheless, we know very little about how the consumption of different kinds of news influences political participation. Thus, to address this gap in the literature, the present study considers two kinds of news—political feature news and entertainment news.

All in all, the present study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among two types of online news (political news and entertainment news), news-related online activities (deliberation perceptions and online interactive activities), online users’ political engagement, and social trust by using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach with a set of web-log data combined with survey questionnaires collected in South Korea.

2. Literature review

2.1. The effects of two types of online news consumption on political participation and social trust

Ever since Putnam (1995) argued that television viewing has a negative effect on civic engagement, the question of whether media use negatively affects the formation of social networks or social activities has been debated among scholars (e.g., Lin, 2001; McLeod et al., 1999; Paxton, 1999, 2002). Scholars (e.g., Norris, 1996; Shah, 1998) who opposed Putnam argued that his study assessed television-watching behaviors by measuring the time spent watching TV without any consideration of either motivation or program preference. Williams (2006) noted that Putnam’s hypothesis also disregarded the distinctive features of the medium. Indeed, the consideration of distinctive features of certain media seems particularly important when explaining the role of the Internet in achieving social outcomes such as political participation and social trust. Unlike television, the Internet allows users to communicate and interact with each other, thereby sharing their ideas with others. This interactive trait is reinforced as the Internet merges with social networking services and mobile devices.

Among diverse online activities, online news consumption has garnered much scholarly attention. This is because news consumption behavior has been identified as a critical predictor for users’ political participation and social trust. For instance, Kaye and Johnson (2003) showed that online news consumption fosters political participation by making political information more accessible. Other studies have also indicated that getting news from the Internet increases users’ political interest (Livingstone and Markham, 2008). In addition, many studies have reported a positive effect of the Internet or online news reading on social activity and civic engagement (Amadeo, 2007; Esser and de Vreese, 2007; Norris, 2003). Finally, some studies (e.g., Weaver and Drew, 2001; Norris, 2003) have found a significant association between information-seeking on the Internet and social trust.

However, such studies on the effects of online news consumption on social outcomes are somewhat limited, given that there is a lack of consideration for the broad range of content that Internet news provides. Different types of news content may have different effects on political participation. Yet scholars have primarily focused on the effects of political news on political participation, viewing other types of news, particularly entertainment news, as “unhealthy” content. This is because entertainment news is said to either directly or indirectly undermine citizens’ willingness to engage in civic activities (e.g., Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Shah et al., 2001a,b).

However, as entertainment shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* have become increasingly popular among viewers, the role of entertainment news in civic engagement has attracted scholarly attention as a means of political information gathering. Many studies (e.g., Baum, 2003; Cao and Brewer, 2008) demonstrated that entertainment programs fostered the ability of those who were not very politically attentive to engage in political learning, to evaluate political candidates, and/or to engage in political campaigns. In a similar vein, some studies supported the view that television entertainment such as political satires (e.g., *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*) and late-night talk shows (e.g., *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*) might be positively related to political participation (e.g., Hoffman and Thomson, 2009; Tsfati et al., 2009), or at least not negatively associated with political participation (e.g., Cao and Brewer, 2008). If this is indeed the case, it means that watching entertainment television does not necessarily lead to the mass apathy that inheres in a lack of civic engagement. Rather, it offers entertainment consumers, particularly adolescents, a way to reinvest in democratic citizenship.

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