



Social media and online political participation: The mediating role of exposure to cross-cutting and like-minded perspectives



Yonghwan Kim^{a,*}, Hsuan-Ting Chen^b

^a Department of Telecommunication and Film, College of Communication and Information Sciences, The University of Alabama, United States

^b School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 April 2015

Received in revised form 9 July 2015

Accepted 13 August 2015

Available online 15 August 2015

Keywords:

Social media

Blogs

Social networking sites (SNSs)

Cross-cutting exposure

Exposure to like-minded perspectives

Online political participation

ABSTRACT

This study examines (1) how social media use (i.e., blogs and social network sites (SNSs)) influences individuals' online political participation; and (2) the mediating role of exposure to political perspectives (i.e., exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting viewpoints) in the relationship between social media use and online political participation. The results show that both blog and SNS use are positively related to online political participation. Most interestingly, exposure to like-minded perspectives mediates the relationship between individuals' blog use and online political participation while exposure to cross-cutting perspectives mediates the relationship between SNS use and participation.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The growing popularity of social media (e.g., blogs and social network sites) has motivated scholars to explore the roles such media play in everyday life and in a democratic society. Specifically, researchers have asked how these applications affect individuals' social capital, the nature of online communication, and communicative expressions (Ellison et al., 2007; Walther et al., 2009). Evidence suggests that social media use facilitates political participation and engagement in civic activities (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Macafee and Simone, 2012); however, the literature has mainly focused on the direct influence of social media use and less is known about what mediates the relationship between social media use and citizens' participatory activities (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Pasek et al., 2009; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Previous studies have demonstrated that news media use indirectly influences citizens' participatory behaviors via psychological variables such as political efficacy (e.g., Jung et al., 2011; Shah et al., 2005). What mediating variables tell us is how or why media effects occur (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Hence, if we are to better understand how social media use influences political engagement online, we should identify mediators of social media use and participatory behaviors.

The current study aims to investigate the mediating factors of social media use, in particular the use of blogs and SNSs, on online political participation. It focuses on exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting political points of view. The literature has demonstrated that exposure to like-minded or similar political perspectives contributes to political participation (Dilliplane, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012). However, many studies have also found a positive relationship between exposure to dissimilar or diverse views and political participation (Kwak et al., 2005; Leighley, 1990; Scheufele et al., 2006, 2004). Others have found that exposure to political difference lowers participation (McClurg, 2006; Mutz, 2002). This line of research could provide insight into how exposure to like-minded as well as cross-cutting perspectives influences relations

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: yonghwan.kim@ua.edu (Y. Kim), htchen@cuhk.edu.hk (H.-T. Chen).

between social media use and political participation. Beyond the direct influence of social media use on citizens' political participation online, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by examining how exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting views mediates the influence of individuals' social media use on online political activities.

This study contends that the relationship between social media, exposure to like-minded and cross-cutting perspectives, and online political participation is likely to depend on the type of social media application. That is, blogs and SNSs like Facebook differently influence the extent to which people are exposed to like-minded or cross-cutting perspectives, and this may impact citizens' political behaviors. Given this, we propose the possibility that pathways to political engagement differ according to the types and characteristics of social media platforms. SNS use is positively related to exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints (Kim, 2011), while blog use is associated with exposure to like-minded viewpoints (Meraz, 2007; Tremayne et al., 2006). Thereby, the use of SNS may influence online political participation through exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints, whereas blogs may influence online political participation through exposure to like-minded viewpoints. By empirically examining and explicating this argument, the current study aims to contribute to the growing literature on the democratic influence of social media.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online political participation

Political participation refers to activity by ordinary citizens that has the intent or effect of influencing political outcomes such as policies and government action (Verba et al., 1995). The literature has identified several dimensions of traditional forms of political engagement, such as voting, campaign activity, informal activity in local communities, contacting officials, and organizational or collective activities (Verba et al., 1995). A wide range of studies have used these conventional measures of political participation (Brady et al., 1995; McLeod et al., 1999).

Today, however, a new venue of political engagement has emerged in digital media, especially the Internet. Hence, scholars need to consider new forms of political participation separately from traditional forms (Jung et al., 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012). The Internet makes possible a variety of online political activities such as writing emails to politicians, visiting campaign websites, donating money online, and so forth (Gibson et al., 2005). The Internet has lowered the cost of political participation, helping to level the playing field of political engagement somewhat (Bimber, 2001; Gibson et al., 2005; Quintelier and Vissers, 2008). The literature points out that online participation differs from offline participation in its underlying mechanisms. Although traditional offline participation requires time and civic skills, those resources seem less necessary to participate in an online environment (Best and Krueger, 2005). The Internet dramatically reduces the need to have time to engage in politics; for instance, emailing an elected representative or government official is much quicker and easier than sending her/him a letter (Best and Krueger, 2005; Bimber, 1999). Some research has demonstrated that the antecedents of political behaviors differ between offline and online (e.g., Best and Krueger, 2005). Recent studies have started to examine online political participation separately from traditional forms of offline participation (Jung et al., 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012). In line with this trend, this study focuses solely on citizens' online political participation.

2.2. Blogs and political participation

The popularity of blogging, particularly political blogging, has increased sharply in recent years. (Herring et al., 2007; Tremayne, 2007). Research has demonstrated that blogs positively influence citizens' political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009). One possible reason for this influence is the blog's role as information provider. The blog as an alternative information source—offering viewpoints distinct from mainstream media and providing essential information regarding current events and campaign news (Kaye, 2005)—may have a positive impact on citizens' political participation.

Another possible reason is the role of blogs as a forum for the citizenry, a space for interactive communication between readers and bloggers. Blogs allow for “feedback from readers in the form of comment functions,” and readers who refrain from commenting still “get the sense of being part of an event by reading the live discourse of others” (Tremayne, 2007, p. xiii). It has been demonstrated that interpersonal communication plays a critical role in a citizen's participatory engagement, as presented in the Citizen Communication Mediation Model (see Shah et al., 2005). As such, it is important to note that informational media use and interpersonal communication are key antecedents to a citizen's civic and political engagement. Given that blogs function as both information sources and forums for discussing public affairs, it is plausible that blogging may positively influence citizens' political engagement.¹

¹ Interpersonal communication may itself constitute political engagement. Indeed, some researchers have conceptualized citizens' communication activities as political participation. For example, Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) consider respondents' communicative activities, such as commenting on news online and participating in online forums, as expressive participation. In addition, other studies also conceptualize interpersonal discussion as discursive participation activities (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Nir, 2012). However, a body of literature has conceptualized interpersonal discussion and citizens' participatory behaviors separately; the former refers to informal political conversation among citizens or non-elite members and the latter focuses more on activities that have the intent or effect of influencing policy or government action (Brady, 1999; Jung et al., 2011; McLeod et al., 1999; Shah et al., 2005; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Interpersonal communication has been introduced here to explain why blogging may have a positive influence on participatory engagement online. People in the blogosphere can discuss issues with one another, which should be positively related to political engagement. Likewise, the current study does not measure interpersonal communication behaviors, whether in the blogosphere or face-to-face. The method section below offers more detail on the operationalization of blog use and online political engagement.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/466013>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/466013>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)