



Media use during conflicts: Information seeking and political efficacy during the 2012 Mexican elections



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ABSTRACT

Public access to accurate and reliable information is fundamental to democracy and democratic decision-making. In emerging democracies, during political crises or controversial elections, reliable information is often difficult to obtain. In authoritarian regimes, citizens' perceptions of information reliability are tightly linked to trust in government, and both are typically low. Open government policies help build trust that is essential during protests or contentious elections. Uses and gratifications (U&G) theory states that people use diverse media to try to satisfy their need for reliable information. Gratifying this need is tied to the larger concept of political information efficacy (PIE), i.e., the belief a person holds about him/herself as being politically informed and competent to participate in political thought and action. We investigated these inter-related concepts by administering a survey to an opportunity sample of young adults at a public state university in Mexico. We find that respondents perceived that information from face-to-face and telephone communication with members of their social network, as well as online sources were the most reliable. Information from offline sources, such as TV and newspapers, especially pro-government sources, were the least reliable. Further, the information factors of availability, reliability, influence and sharing had positive relationships with PIE. These results suggest that in conditions of uncertain political information, social networks and online information sources are essential to political information efficacy and democratic political participation.

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1. Introduction

Public access to accurate and reliable information is fundamental to democracy (i.e., self-government by the people) and democratic decision-making (Meikeljohn, 1948). In order for citizens to govern, through their elected officials, it is paramount that they be well informed. It is essential during election campaigns that voters get accurate and reliable information about political candidates and their policies. Reliable information during elections is a primary objective for many campaign managers, candidates, and voters (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Newman, 1999).

Public access to reliable (i.e., unbiased, factual) information depends largely on a free press that helps to educate and inform citizens on civic issues and trade-offs among competing policies. Traditional broadcast

media, such as print newspapers, radio, and television, have historically played a critical role in informing the public (McQuail, 1983; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Schramm, 1964; Blumler, 1979). However, in emerging democracies, where there are government constraints on freedom of the press, it is especially difficult for citizens to find reliable sources of information (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963; Kavanaugh, 1998; Dahdal, 2012; Noueihed & Warren, 2012; Al-Kandari & Hasanen, 2012). During political crises, such as contentious elections or mass street protests, authoritarian governments have often further restricted information flows, by closing down newspapers, revoking licenses, or shutting down Internet services and cell phone networks (Lotan et al., 2011; Saletan, 2011).

Despite some governments' systematic efforts to limit Internet access or services, in general the overall sources of political information have been increasing, due to the proliferation of the Internet, social media and cellphones (Fox & Ramos, 2011; Maarek, 2011; Howard, 2006). The Internet has provided access to diverse information sources and opportunities for citizens and organizations to exchange

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information and engage in civic life (Shah et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2001). Social media in particular offer systems and platforms that conform naturally to a political discussion network with family, friends, and acquaintances (Moy & Gastil, 2006). Social network sites (SNS), wikis, blogs, micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter, Tumblr), and image-sharing sites (e.g., Flickr, YouTube), among other social media, make it easy for individuals to produce as well as consume information in small groups of trusted friends, family, acquaintances, and community associations.

Seeking information is one of several user needs or motivations identified by uses and gratifications theory, and is well established in prior research (Blumler, 1979; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In this paper we report findings from an exploration into information-seeking behavior among young adults in Mexico during the election campaign in July 2012 that was marked by the 'I am 132' protest movement. We compared diverse information sources for their reliability and influence on participants' thinking about the elections and related events. We also investigated the information factors of availability, reliability, sharing and influence to understand which of these factors are significantly associated with participants' political information efficacy (PIE). PIE is a person's belief that s/he is politically well informed and capable of participating in political processes, such as discussions, protests and voting. We hypothesized that participants more reliable information sources would have a greater effect on PIE. Increases in PIE are associated with higher levels of democratic participation. A more 'open government' – defined as greater transparency, collaboration, and participation – has the potential to help reduce corruption (Bertot et al., 2010) and raise citizens' trust in government (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Yavuz & Welch, 2014).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Media uses and gratifications theory

Uses and gratifications theory seeks to explain why people use particular media, in terms of specific motivations, needs, or purposes (Katz, 1959). It focuses on the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the media, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other information related activities), resulting in need gratifications and other consequences (Katz et al., 1973) (p. 510).

Through media studies, several gratifications, also known as motives, have emerged to explain individual differences in media selection and use; these are: social interaction, relaxation, entertainment, passing time, interpersonal learning or sociability, companionship, and information-seeking. Specific gratifications by media also have been explored; for example, motivations for social media use include social/affection, recognition, need to vent, entertainment, and information-seeking or cognitive gratifications.

Our paper focuses on information-seeking gratifications because we are interested in the use of diverse information sources by young adults in Mexico for the purpose of staying informed about political developments related to the presidential (and parliamentary) election campaign in 2012. As with other gratifications or motivations, information-seeking exists across diverse media, including TV, radio, print newspapers, and Internet, including social media (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). Some studies have found that the use of the Internet to obtain political information is likely to predict political efficacy, engagement and knowledge (Al-Kandari & Hasanen, 2012; Moy & Gastil, 2006). Social media have been used increasingly as communication channels for electoral information, political developments and discussion (Jungheer et al., 2012; Conover et al., 2011; Gayo-Avello, Metaxas, & Mustafaraj, 2011; Harfoush, 2009; Towner, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014).

Various studies have demonstrated the importance of the Internet and social media use during the Arab uprising (Dahdal, 2012; Noueihed & Warren, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011; Kavanaugh et al., 2013).

We extend this research by investigating media use from a uses and gratifications perspective that asks specifically the question of how did users judge the relative availability, reliability and influence of different information sources, combined with information sharing, as an influence on their political information efficacy during elections with contentious protests.

Some of the most relevant research that employs uses and gratifications theory to study media use during conflicts includes studies of Al-Jazeera during the Gulf War (Jamal & Melkote, 2008), and studies of opportunity samples of university students in Egypt and Kuwait before the Arab uprising (Al-Kandari & Hasanen, 2012). In their study of Al-Jazeera television coverage of the Gulf War in 1991 (and as has been argued elsewhere) Jamal and Melkote (2008) found that entertainment, relaxation, companionship, and social/affection gratifications were *not* as important as information-seeking. That is, in situations of contention or uncertainty, information-seeking gratifications are more important than unintended social, relaxation, and inter-personal motivations for using media. Other related research includes the examination of Internet use, including social media, during natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes; these studies have found that media use is important for staying informed and notifying others in crisis situations (Starbird & Palen, 2010; Hughes & Palen, 2009). We extend these studies by employing uses and gratifications theory to test the effects of information factors on PIE.

We accept assertions that unintentional gratifications are not significant to individuals in conflict environments where personal, family, and business interests are at risk. Our study focuses on the information-seeking gratifications of individuals living in the contentious environment of the Mexican electoral campaign in 2012 where the "I am 132" protest movement (described below), along with voters, sought to obtain, evaluate, and share reliable information about political developments.

2.2. Political information efficacy

In political communication theory and research, political efficacy variables have been linked with political engagement and have served as powerful predictors of political satisfaction (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). People with high political efficacy are more likely to report satisfaction with the political system, or understanding of the political process, and are more likely to participate in various forms of political activities. In Western democracies, higher levels of PIE are associated with stronger democratic institutions and participation. The concept of political efficacy derives from the idea of self-efficacy, which is the belief a person holds that s/he can overcome obstacles to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1997).

Lack of political information, or the lack of confidence in information, is an important obstacle to political engagement, especially among young people. When discussing why young adults do not engage in the political process, scholars (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) assert "young adults often lack the ability to become involved in public life. Most important in this regard is the lack of information – from general knowledge about how government works to specific knowledge about how to register to vote" (p. 345).

The importance of reliable information during electoral campaigns has led researchers to explore the conceptual links between general political efficacy and *political information efficacy*, which "focuses solely on the voter's confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage in the political process (to vote)" (Kaid et al., 2007) (p. 1096). In the US, the concept and measurement of political efficacy has been a feature of the National Election Survey since 1952. It is long established that political efficacy encompasses two separate dimensions, external and internal. External political efficacy measures "beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizens' demands" (Niemi et al., 1991) (p. 1407). As such, it is closely related to trust in government. Internal political efficacy measures

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