



Full length article

Cross-cutting exposure on social networking sites: The effects of SNS discussion disagreement on political participation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 September 2015
 Received in revised form
 22 January 2016
 Accepted 23 January 2016
 Available online xxx

Keywords:

Social media
 Discussion
 Disagreement
 News use
 Participation

ABSTRACT

Drawing on a national probability survey, this study explores the relationship between discussion disagreement on social networking sites and political participation by focusing on the intervening effects of political discussion and news use. The results revealed that discussion disagreement on SNSs inhibits off- and online political participation, and this relationship is partially mediated by the frequency of SNS political discussion. Furthermore, the frequency of news-related activities on SNSs is found to moderate the mediating effect of political discussion. The implications are discussed.

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Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) have been playing an increasingly important role in public life. A majority (63%) of Twitter and Facebook users consider each platform as a primary news source, particularly in the realm of national government and politics (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015b). Information-related activities on SNSs place individuals in a heterogeneous discussion network, which heightens one's likelihood of encountering political disagreement (Barnidge, 2015; Choi & Lee, 2015; Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014).

The growing likelihood of cross-cutting exposure during SNS interactions necessitates a thorough investigation into its influence on political participation, as engagement in public affairs has long been revered as an essential aspect of a healthy and well-functioning democratic society (Held, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Previous research has extensively explored this relationship in the context of offline interactions, but come to conflicting conclusions. While some studies report a negative relationship between discussion disagreement and political participation (Mutz, 2006; Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012), other scholars contend disagreement positively contributes to participatory behaviors (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Scheufele, Hardy, Brossard, Waismel-Manor, & Nisbet, 2006; Song & Eveland, 2015). Our

study first reviews the literature (e.g., Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013) that attributes these mixed findings to the inconsistencies in the operationalization of discussion disagreement, and then explains why we stick closer to the former research line.

Individuals encountering disagreement on SNSs are less likely to participate in political activities, because the fear of isolation leads them to refrain from further political conversations (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1974) that could greatly contribute to political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014). Previous studies have demonstrated that online reasoning activities, such as political discussion, could relay the effects of certain types of media use on political engagement (Cho et al., 2009; Ekström & Östman, 2015). In this sense, it is likely that SNS political discussion mediates the relationship between discussion disagreement and political participation.

Further, discussion disagreement could arise in various contexts on SNSs, including interactions via public news commenting and private chatting. Frequent SNS news users could easily discuss politics with others by leaving public comments underneath a certain news post (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). For the politically inattentive who avoid news on SNSs, political discussion tend to come up incidentally during their SNS private chats where politics is not the central topic (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). In this case, whether discussion disagreement occurs via public commenting or private chatting is arguably dependent on one's frequency of SNS news use. These two distinct circumstances would

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produce different political outcomes, because public commenting involves a higher degree of online incivility and fear of isolation than private chatting (Herring, 2007; Pin & Hsieh, 2014). In this sense, we explore whether and how SNS news use could moderate the effects of SNS discussion disagreement.

Employing a national probability survey, we investigate the mechanism of how discussion disagreement on social media is related to online and offline political participation. We first explore the association between SNS discussion disagreement and participation, testing the mediating role played by the frequency of SNS political discussion in this relationship. We then investigate how the frequency of SNS news use moderates the mediating effect of political discussion. The findings contribute to the understanding of the link between SNS activities and participatory democracy.

1. SNS discussion disagreement and political participation

Scholarly debate exists over whether discussion disagreement mobilizes or inhibits political participation. Some researchers contend that exposure to disagreement during political discussion discourages involvement in political activities (Mutz, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Exposure to conflicting views is likely to engender ambivalence within an individual, which in turn decreases one's likelihood of taking effective political action (Hutchens, Hmielowski, & Beam, 2015; Mutz, 2006). The fear of isolation also leads individuals to refrain from further political conversations (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1974), which contribute to political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Furthermore, political differences in interpersonal discussion could produce anxiety because disagreement undermines the social harmony within one's network (Mutz, 2006). In order to assure social harmony, individuals will be less likely to decide to take positions on political issues.

However, research has also documented evidence for a positive relationship between political disagreement and participation (Kwak et al., 2005; Scheufele et al., 2006; Song & Eveland, 2015). Exposure to diverse views forces individuals to learn about alternative perspectives and reflect more carefully on their own views (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Scheufele et al., 2006). This learning process indirectly enhances political participation because political knowledge is critical to involvement in politics (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011).

These conflicting findings in previous literature can be attributed to the differences in the operationalization of discussion disagreement (Barnidge, 2015; Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013). On the one hand, researchers who identify a negative relationship between disagreement and participation (e.g. Mutz, 2006) measure discussion disagreement based on respondents' general perception of disagreement during political interactions. On the other hand, scholars proposing a positive relationship between disagreement and participation tend to measure disagreement by one's frequency of political conversations with those who have different political characteristics (e.g., partisanship and/or vote choice) (e.g. Kwak et al., 2005). These inconsistencies on the operationalization of discussion disagreement also exist in studies of social media use, with the former measurement employed by Kim (2011) and Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Gee (2015) and the latter one used by Choi and Lee (2015).

While both operational measures intend to capture the degree of discussion disagreement, this study sticks closer to the former for two reasons. First, perceived disagreement matters more than actual disagreement in terms of its influence on political outcomes (Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak & Price, 2012). Indeed, Klofstad et al. (2013) empirically compared the effects of these two measurements on political attitudes and behaviors, concluding that

perceived disagreement is more consequential. Second, frequent discussion with politically dissimilar others can be considered to be an antecedent of discussion disagreement, but does not necessarily lead to more exposure to dissimilar political views (Barnidge, 2015; Mutz, 2006). In the context of political discussions, individuals usually avoid disagreement through various means in order to reduce psychic discomfort (Festinger, 1957). In this case, a Democrat could talk frequently with Republican friends about non-partisan political issues, which would not produce much disagreement during the conversations.

In sum, our study opts for the perception-based measure of discussion disagreement. Previous studies that also focus on perceived disagreement have reported a negative relationship between discussion disagreement and political participation (Mutz, 2006; Valenzuela et al., 2012). This study extends these findings to the social media context and proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. Perceived discussion disagreement on SNSs is negatively associated with political participation.

2. Mediating role of SNS political discussion

The communication mediation model suggests that reasoning activities, such as political discussion, could relay the effects of certain types of media use on political participation (Shah et al., 2007). For example, a two-wave panel survey indicates that the relationship between online news use and political participation is mediated by online political interactions (Ekström & Östman, 2015). In the social media context, political expression is also found to mediate the relationship between SNS news consumption and political engagement in a two-wave survey study (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). It is likely, therefore, that SNS political discussion mediates the relationship between discussion disagreement and political participation.

The mediating role of SNS political discussion can be explained by a sequence of two paths. First, SNS discussion disagreement discourages individuals' involvement in political conversations. Social media users monitor the online opinion climate based on the frequency of encountering disagreeable SNS content (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Individuals who come across significant disagreement in SNS discussions tend to perceive their own views to be in the minority, and then refrain from further online expression due to the fear of isolation (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Echoing the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), social media users are less willing to express political views if they think their audience would disagree with them (Hampton et al., 2014). Further, exposure to disagreement undermines one's interest in politics (Torcal & Maldonado, 2014; Wojcieszak & Price, 2012) and leads to the belief that political expression on SNSs produces negative feelings (e.g., anger and discomfort) (Vraga et al., 2015). Such changes in political interest and the perception of political expression on SNSs are likely to inhibit involvement in further political conversations.

The second path of the mediation model is that political discussion on SNSs is positively associated with political participation. Political discussion, as a reasoning behavior, is crucial in encouraging political participation (Eveland, 2004; McLeod et al., 1999; Shah et al., 2007; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). Studies relying on multi-wave surveys indicate that interpersonal interaction leads individuals to more thoroughly comprehend related concepts and create reasoned argumentation (Cappella, Price, & Nir, 2002; Shah et al., 2007). These elaborative processes produce strong political orientations, such as political efficacy and political knowledge, which subsequently enhance participatory democracy (Jung et al., 2011; Min, 2007). In addition, the expression

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