



Full length article

## Clicking vs. sharing: The relationship between online news behaviors and political knowledge

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## ABSTRACT

Online news and social media are transforming the process of news production and reading. While research has shown that news media play an important role in providing information to the public in democratic societies, research investigating the impact of sharing news online on the process of public opinion formation is in a nascent stage. This study examines the impact of viewing and sharing online news on two dimensions of political knowledge: factual knowledge and structural knowledge. Results from survey data collected over 3-waves during the 2012 US Presidential Election from an online panel of 403 US adult Internet users show that reading online news is positively related to factual political knowledge. Sharing online news, in contrast, is related to structural knowledge. We discuss these findings and their implications for future research investigating the role of online news.

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### 1. Introduction

Does sharing news online contribute to knowledge above and beyond reading online news stories? The last decade has seen a transformation of online political information distribution through the rise of social network sites (SNS) like Facebook and Twitter. According to the Pew Research Center, about half of Facebook users view news through the site (Holcomb, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2013). With 64% of adults reporting that they have a Facebook account, 30% of the US adult population reads news on Facebook. Furthermore, 10% of US adults watch news videos on Facebook and 8% of US adults view news stories on Twitter. Although considerable social scientific research has demonstrated that use of traditional news outlets increases knowledge (e.g., Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000), few studies have examined knowledge acquisition via SNS. The rise of SNS as a primary news portal poses a new challenge in understanding knowledge acquisition. Indeed, SNS operate very differently compared to traditional news media. While SNS allow users to read news stories posted from traditional news organizations, social media also empower non-elite users to share and discuss political information with a potentially large audience despite a lack of formal training or

adherence to journalistic norms of objectivity or correctness.

This study examines the relationship between reading and sharing political news online with factual knowledge and structural knowledge over time during the 2012 US General Election. Past research has consistently found a positive relationship between online news use and political engagement (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013; Vitak et al., 2011). However, only a few studies have begun to disentangle differences in specific online behaviors, such as comparing those who *read* news online and those who *share* news online (e.g., Lee & Ma, 2012; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). This study tries to provide a better understanding of the consequences of differing online behaviors by investigating the relationships between online news viewing and sharing with factual and structural political knowledge.

### 2. Literature review

#### 2.1. Online news

Political communication scholars have been interested in the impact of online news for over two decades. The Internet is unique in that it allows for users to participate in the news dissemination process through community “gatewatching”, where users in online communities can share links with each other (Bruns, 2005). The

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most visible platforms available on the Internet that facilitate user online news viewing and sharing are social networking sites. Social network sites can be broadly defined as web-based services where people can create detailed individual profiles, connect with other people on the site, and view and share information with others (boyd & ellison, 2007). While these sites have differences in terms of content and norms, the two most popular social media sites in the US, Facebook and Twitter, allow users to find and share links and opinions about the news. Indeed, over half of Facebook users report the site is “an important way for them to get news” (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Guskin, 2013). Due to the increasing popularity of these sites for news, scholars have investigated and uncovered many consequences of consuming news via social media.

Extant research has found that social media news exposure affects political engagement and attitudes. Scholars have consistently found that people who receive news through social media are likely to be politically engaged, both online and offline (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013). Holt et al. (2013) found that social media use is related to increased interest in news and offline participation. Vitak et al. (2011) found that exposure to online Facebook friends’ political activities, such as political discussions or political news links, is positively related to a person’s own political activities.

## 2.2. Sharing and viewing online news

Although the research examining the political consequences of SNS use has revealed a number of important findings, other scholars have argued that we should look past general access to technologies as antecedents and effects and focus on *differentiated* use of technology (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004). One clear difference in using the Internet and social media is that some users actively participate while others lurk (i.e., do not contribute information, see Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004; Rau, Gao, & Ding, 2008). For example, Pew Research recently found less than half of Facebook users who view news on the site also post news links and less than a third of Facebook newsreaders discuss news on the site (Mitchell et al., 2013). Van den Hooff and van Weenen (2004) articulated the conceptual differences between information acquisition and information sharing in computer-mediated communication. They argue that information acquisition, or collection, is more passive and requires a lower commitment, while sharing information, or donating, requires active and more motivated participation. Using a uses & gratifications perspective, Hanson and Haridakis (2008) identified different motivations for viewing and sharing news videos on YouTube. They found that information seeking motivated news viewing, while expression motivated sharing news videos. In another study, Lee and Ma (2012) found that status seeking was a primary motivation for sharing news among students. In sum, sharing news online requires additional *social* and *political* motivation compared with consuming information online, which is primarily driven by *information seeking* motivations.

However, research has shown a link between information acquisition and subsequent information sharing in both offline and online contexts. For example, Southwell and Yzer (2007) found a link between traditional news use and political discussion. Weeks and Holbert (2013) found that online news viewing and sharing were strongly related. In addition, strong partisans were more likely to share news compared to those with more moderate political ideologies. Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005) showed that online messaging, such as sharing news links over e-mail, mediated the positive effects of online information seeking on political participation. More recently, Yamamoto, Kushin, and Dalisay (2015) found that online political expression, such as news sharing,

mediated the relationship between viewing news online and political participation. In another study, they likened political expression, such as sharing news links and expressing political opinions online with more traditional political discussion (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Given the link between online news exposure and news sharing, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H1.** Online news exposure will be positively related to online news sharing.

## 2.3. Political knowledge

The distinction between using and sharing news is important when looking at other political outcomes such as knowledge. Scholars generally have conceptualized political knowledge via two dimensions: factual knowledge and structural knowledge. The vast majority of research has focused on factual knowledge, which is conceptualized as being able to correctly identify bits of information (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Huang & Price, 2001; Neuman, 1981; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Research has found a variety of communication sources foster increases in factual knowledge, such as reading newspapers (Eveland, Marton, & Seo, 2004), viewing television (Zhao & Chaffee, 1995), paying greater attention to a variety of media (Eveland, Hutchens, & Shen, 2009; Martinelli & Chaffee, 1995), viewing presidential debates (Holbrook, 2002) and discussing politics with others (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Feldman & Price, 2008). Structural knowledge, on the other hand, is conceptualized as being able to see the connections that exist between related concepts (Eveland et al., 2004; Neuman, 1981). A smaller number of studies have looked at the relationship between communication variables and structural knowledge. Research has shown evidence of a relationship between hard news use and integrated knowledge structures (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Partisan news use has been shown to be correlated with increased structural knowledge when the information supports people’s political views, and lower levels of structural knowledge when the information challenges people’s opinion (Hutchens, Hmielowski, & Beam, 2015). Moreover, political discussion has also been linked to increased structural knowledge (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Hively & Eveland, 2009). More importantly, research has found that clicking on hyperlinks while reading a news story increases structural knowledge (Eveland et al., 2004; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). In essence, active engagement with the material strengthens connections between pieces of information.

### 2.3.1. Online news and political knowledge

Little research has examined the relationship between online news shared on social media and political knowledge. Our goal is to extend this research by examining the relationship between viewing and sharing online news with our two types of political knowledge (factual and structural). While not looking explicitly at online viewing and sharing, Lee and Oh (2013) found that veteran users of Twitter who reported high need for orientation held higher levels of factual political knowledge. However, Twitter users who reported being motivated by information seeking did not report higher levels of factual political knowledge than non-users. Given that research has often found a link between consuming information across a wide range of communication sources (e.g., news use, political discussion, etc.) and both types of knowledge, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H2a.** Exposure to online news will be positively related to factual knowledge.

**H2b.** Exposure to online news will be positively related to

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