



The role of news in promoting political disagreement on social media[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Determining whether and how social media networks expose individuals to political disagreement is critical to understanding how individuals experience civil society in the digital age. Recent research from the United States and Europe shows that, all else equal, heavy social media users are exposed to more political disagreement on social media than light users. The present study seeks to elaborate on these findings in the context of Colombia. In doing so, it adds depth to existing theory about social media and political disagreement by outlining a process for how social media use results in exposure to disagreement and the role played by news. Results from path analysis show that (a) news use on social media acts as a link between general use and disagreement and (b) political engagement mediates the relationship between news use and disagreement. Results are discussed in light of existing literature and possibilities for further research.

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1. Introduction

As social media proliferate on a global scale, often with substantial political impact (e.g., [Eltantawy & Weist, 2011](#); [Harlow, 2012](#); [Howard & Parks, 2012](#); [Lim, 2012](#); [Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012](#)), important questions arise about their role in processes related to political expression and the public sphere. Recent arguments assert that the modern individual is situated within an egocentric public sphere ([Papacharissi, 2009](#); [Rojas, 2014](#); [Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011](#)). Individuals are increasingly embedded in loose, personalized networks of affiliation and exchange ([Benkler, 2006](#); [Rainie & Wellman, 2012](#)), and they are connected to these networks through digital media that promote expression and interactivity ([Bennett, 2008](#); [Boyd & Ellison, 2007](#); [Loader & Mercea, 2011](#)). These digital communication networks link the private spaces of individuals with the public sphere, that is, they connect people with civil society ([Friedland, Hove, & Rojas, 2006](#); [Loader & Mercea, 2011](#); [Rojas, 2014](#)). Determining whether and how *political disagreement* occurs within these networks is therefore critical to understanding how individuals experience civil society in the digital age ([Barbera, 2014](#); [Brundidge, 2010](#); [Kim, 2011](#); [Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013](#)).

Recent research from the United States and Europe shows evidence that social media use is positively related to political disagreement on social media ([Barbera, 2014](#); [Kim, 2011](#); [Kim et al.,](#)

[2013](#); [Mitchell, Gotfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014](#)). All else equal, heavy social media users are exposed to more political disagreement than light users. The present study seeks to elaborate on these findings in the context of Colombia. In doing so, it adds depth to existing theory about social media and political disagreement by outlining a process for how social media use results in exposure to political disagreement. This model rests on two broad claims. First, social media use facilitates exposure to news posted by a wider array of individuals and organizations. Second, political disagreement occurs when individuals engage with social opinion about news.

1.1. Existing theory

Existing theory about why social media use results in political disagreement rests on two observations: (a) Social media afford opportunities to share information and express personal opinions and (b) social media diversify communication within egocentric networks through the articulation of weak tie relationships ([Barbera, 2014](#); [Brundidge, 2010](#); [Kim et al., 2013](#)). In simpler terms, social media expose people to more information from more sources than they would otherwise be exposed to. Selectivity does little to counteract these forces. Social selectivity is multidimensional and not limited to political choice ([Kim et al., 2013](#)). Informational selectivity, meanwhile, is more likely to be politically motivated. However, people do not necessarily avoid cross-cutting news media online ([Garrett, 2009](#)) and interpersonal recommendations on social media often trump partisan media cues ([Messing & Westwood, 2014](#)). Thus, social media might inadvertently expose individuals to political disagreement ([Brundidge, 2010](#)).

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Importantly, this theory is built on the concept of *communicative diversity* rather than *social network diversity*. Social media may not diversify social networks, but they do diversify communication that occurs within them. This is a subtle but important distinction that avoids the pitfalls of counterarguments based on social norms of connectivity. Rather than use social media to meet new people, most people use them to articulate existing social connections (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007), although it must be said that some social media sites (e.g., Twitter) are more conducive to network expansion than others (e.g., Facebook or Instagram). But even while the primary role of social media is to articulate existing social networks rather than to expand them, articulation still diversifies communication in comparison to interpersonal contexts, which are limited by geographic space (Brundidge, 2010; Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004), and anonymous online contexts, in which relatively homogeneous political communication occurs (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Wojcieszak, 2008).

1.2. News and information in online social networks

When it comes to political communication on social media, news is (one of) the primary source of public information, and recent literature emphasizes the role of news in promoting communicative diversity on social media. For example, Lee, Choi, Kim, and Kim (2014) show that social media diversify communication networks, in part, through news use (see also, Barbera, 2014), which implies, of course, that social media promote news use. This conclusion is generally borne out by observational analysis: Research shows a positive relationship between social media use and news use on social media in various political contexts (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012).

Part of the explanation for the relationship between general use and news use has to do with network size and structure. Larger, more diffuse networks are better at spreading information in social networks because they contain more weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Research shows a consistently positive association between network size and content diffusion (Adar & Adamic, 2005; Bakshy, Karrar, & Adamic, 2009; Cha, Mislove, & Gummadi, 2009). Meanwhile, a large-scale Facebook experiment shows that the number of friends posting a link to a story increased the probability of sharing that story (Bakshy, Rosenn, Marlow, & Adamic, 2012). Finally, social media network size is positively related to relevant behaviors, including political participation and/or group formation, commonly thought to result from information exposure (e.g., Backstrom, Huttenlocher, Kleinberg, & Lan, 2006; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). And while other structural characteristics of networks are also important for information diffusion (Centola, 2010), network size facilitates the influence of many of these structures (Horowitz & Malkhi, 2003).

Information-sharing affordances of social media represent another explanation for the relationship between use and news use (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Posting news is relatively uncommon among the average user, but it is very common among politically involved users (Glynn, Hugu, & Hoffman, 2012). In fact, approximately 20–30% of social media users, who some have called “power users,” account for substantially more content than typical users (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Raine, 2014a). In other words, a few users post a lot of news, which means that the average user is exposed to more news than they post. Once again, this conclusion is borne out in research: About 50% of U.S. adult web users get news from social media, which is approximately the same proportion as those who watch TV news (Barbera, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2014). In Colombia, the percentages are even higher, where, according to this study, 66% of social media users report using either Facebook or Twitter for news.

Given the above literature, there is good reason to believe that network size and frequency of use will be positively related to news use on social media. However, it is also important to remember that the way individuals use media matters when it comes to its effects (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). The Internet generally contributes to the fragmentation of the news audience based on interests or preferences (Prior, 2005). The politically disinterested might use social media less, particularly those social media oriented toward news (e.g., Twitter). They might also use social media differently, choosing not to read or pay attention to news. Therefore, it is important to consider the role of political interest when examining the relationship between general social media use and news use.

1.3. Social media news as a space of engagement

News use promotes engagement with politics and public affairs. For example, news use is associated with political learning (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003), political discussion (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), cognitive reflection (Cho et al., 2009), and political participation (Shah et al., 2001). These studies, which belong to the family of models known as the communication mediation models, suggest that media effects are largely indirect and mediated through indicators of cognitive and/or discursive engagement with information. Political talk, or informal discussion about politics in everyday life, figures centrally into many of these models (e.g., Shah et al., 2005; Nah, Veenstra, & Shah, 2006) and is considered to be a key facilitator of civic and/or political participation.

News use on social media also promotes political expression (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). In fact, social media afford new forms of political messaging (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012) built around the virtual spaces that news stories provide online. And even while recent research shows that commenting on news articles is relatively rare on social media (Hampton, Raine, Lu, Dwyer, Shin, & Purcell, 2014b), when it does occur, it can have influential effects on information processing and its subsequent outcomes, including political participation (Park, 2013; Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2013; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010) and exposure to disagreement (Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2013).

But political talk—or other forms of political messaging—is not the only way to engage with news and public affairs information on social media. People have always used news to monitor social opinion about public issues (Noelle-Neumann, 1984[1993]), and social media visualize social information about others in extended egocentric networks (see, e.g., Walther, Van der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Arguably, social media users have more information with which to monitor their social networks for political opinions as compared to other communicative settings (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Schulz & Roessler, 2012). Moreover, social media juxtapose information from mass-mediated and interpersonal sources (Walther et al., 2011). These messages could interact to influence information evaluation and perceptions of others' opinions (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013; Paek, Hove, & Jeong, 2013; Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, & Anthony, 2010; Xu, 2013).

This literature implies that, on social media, interaction with others *via* political talk or political messaging is not necessary in order to engage with the news and public affairs. Individuals can get a sense of the conversations around stories without participating in those conversations themselves. Therefore, it is important to consider how political monitoring on social media—that is, learning about friend's or follower's political opinions *via* social media content—acts as an additional form of engagement that is interrelated with political messaging.

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