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**Participation and Deliberation in Networked Publics: The Case of
Social Network Sites.**

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A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy in Comparative Politics.

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Abstract

Online social network sites have become an important source of news and political information for many people. At the same time, these sites have transformed the way users encounter and engage with this type of content. This thesis investigates the democratic implications of this trend. Specifically, it estimates the extent to which the relationship between news consumption and political behaviour is mediated by the unique technological affordances of social network sites. It explores how, and to what extent, social network sites transform the way users encounter and engage with news content and how this, in turn, shapes their subsequent political behaviour.

This thesis comprises a series of original comparative research papers. Paper 1 sets out to establish evidence of a relationship between everyday social network site use and political participation. Using nationally representative data collected by the UK Oxford Internet Institute, it establishes evidence to suggest that social network site use has the potential to increase political participation, but only when it comes to certain activities. Building on this analysis, Paper 2 estimates the extent to which social network site use *indirectly* influences political participation, through inadvertently exposing users to news content and information. It finds that although the everyday use of social network sites positively predicts inadvertent news and information exposure, such exposure does not translate into widespread political participation.

Since a growing body of research indicates that the effects of news and information on participatory behaviour is largely channeled through interpersonal communication, Paper 3 and Paper 4 focus on the communicative processes that are typically thought to precede participation. Specifically, these papers analyse a unique set of data to investigate the extent to which social network sites shape the way users discuss the news content they consume on these sites. Paper 3 compares the deliberative quality of user comments left on social network

sites with those left on news websites. Paper 4 adopts an identical methodological approach to compare the level of civility and politeness in user comments across platforms. The findings suggest that while social network sites are conducive to civil political discussion, they do not appear to encourage comments of superior deliberative quality.

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Announcements

Paper 3 (Deliberation 2.0: Comparing the Deliberative Quality of Online News User Comments across Platforms) was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* on March 25 2015. The manuscript is slated for publication later this year.

Paper 4 (Civility 2.0: A Comparative Analysis of Incivility in Online Political Discussion) was accepted for publication in the journal *Information, Communication & Society* on June 26 2014.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	3
Announcements.....	4
Table of Contents.....	5
List of Tables and Figures.....	8

Introduction.....	9
Social network sites: A brief definition.....	13
Social network sites as Networked Publics.....	15
Introducing the Papers.....	16
References.....	23

Paper1: Everyday Social Network Site Use and Political Participation.....	32
Abstract.....	32
Acknowledgement.....	32
Introduction.....	33
Internet technology and political participation.....	34
What makes social network sites different.....	38
Social network sites and political participation.....	42
Methodology.....	46
Findings.....	50
Discussion.....	54
References.....	58

Paper 2: Everyday Social Network Site Use and Political Participation: Estimating the Effect of Inadvertent News and Information Exposure.....	67
Abstract.....	67
Acknowledgement.....	67
Introduction.....	68

News media and political participation.....	69
(Inadvertent) news and information exposure on social network sites.....	71
(Inadvertent) exposure and political participation.....	74
The indirect effect of inadvertent news exposure.....	76
Methodology.....	77
Findings.....	81
Discussion.....	85
References.....	90

Paper 3: Deliberation 2.0: Comparing the Deliberative Quality of Online News User Comments across Platforms.....99

Abstract.....	99
Introduction.....	100
Digital news media and deliberation.....	101
Digital news media and deliberation on Facebook.....	103
What makes Facebook different?.....	104
Methodology.....	108
Findings.....	116
Discussion.....	119
References.....	122

Paper 4: Civility 2.0: A Comparative Analysis of Incivility in Online Political Discussion.....128

Abstract.....	128
Introduction.....	129
Anonymity and disinhibited behaviour.....	131
Anonymity in computer-mediated communication: the reduced social cues approach...	133
Anonymity in CMC: the case of user comment sections.....	135
Anonymity and accountability on Facebook: CMC in a Web 2.0 era.....	136
Methodology.....	139

Findings.....	144
Discussion.....	149
References.....	152
Appendix.....	158
Conclusions.....	160
Introduction.....	160
Further research.....	166
References.....	169

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1.1. Predicting political participation.....	p.51
Table 1.2. Predicting modes of petition signing.....	p.83
Table 2.1. Predicting inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites.....	p.82
Table 2.2. Predicting political participation.....	p.83
Table 2.3. Indirect effects of social network site use on political participation via inadvertent exposure.....	p.85
Table 3.1. Inter-coder reliability: Cohen’s Kappa and Percent-Agreement.....	p.116
Table 3.2. Elements of deliberation by platform type.....	p.118
Table 4.1. Inter-coder agreement.....	p.144
Table 4.2. Civility by platform type.....	p.147
Table 4.3. Impoliteness by platform type.....	p.148
Table 4.4. Interpersonal incivility/impoliteness by platform type.....	p.148
Figure 1.1. Issues covered by the Washington Post Politics sections over 2-constructed weeks (January-June 2013).....	p.158

Introduction

Since the first recognisable social network site (SixDegrees.com) was developed in 1997 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), the popularity of these online services has grown exponentially. Indeed, Facebook, the largest social network site, recently surpassed 1.3 billion active monthly users (Facebook.com), making it the 2nd most visited site globally according to the digital media measurement company Alexa.com. Twitter, the second largest social network site is listed as the 7th most visited site globally, while LinkedIn, a professional social networking tool, is 11th in the same overall global rankings (Alexa.com). Weibo, a Chinese variant of Twitter which caters to users in mainland China, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan, rounds off social network sites in the top 20 in 17th position (Alexa.com).¹

In light of their phenomenal popularity, it is hardly surprising that news organisations have begun to experiment using social network sites as a tool to promote their content (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014; Mitchell, Jurkowitz, & Olmstead, 2014). Recent research suggests that this has been a particularly successful strategy. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life project (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Guskin, 2013), for example, found that almost half of all adults who use Facebook in the United States have encountered news in some form on the site. Given Facebook's widespread popularity, this equates to roughly 30 percent of the country's entire adult population. The same survey also found that, while Facebook remains the dominant source of news and information on social network sites, large numbers of Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+ users also reported having encountered news on their respective sites.

Exposure to news and information on social network sites is not just an American phenomenon. Indeed, similar results have been found in other countries too. A 2013 survey conducted on behalf of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of

¹ All figures are accurate as of 12 January, 2015. Since the papers comprising this thesis were written over a three year period, inconsistencies with regards to these figures occur throughout.

Oxford (Newman & Levy, 2013) found, for example, that even outside the United States social network sites are increasingly being seen as a regular source of news and information. In fact, 45 percent of respondents in Spain claimed that social network sites represent one of the main ways they come across news, followed by 38 percent of respondents in Italy and 22 percent in Denmark. Even in the UK, where big brands such as the BBC dominate the online news market (Newman & Levy, 2013), social network sites represent an important source of news for almost one fifth of respondents (Newman & Levy, 2013, p. 61).

As the primary source of political information for most people (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Graber, 1988), mass mediated news has become a critical component of democratic participation. Indeed, ‘political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship’ (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 8). Exposure to political information increases the likelihood that an individual will cast a vote on election-day. Exposure increases political knowledge, which in turn increases voter turnout (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Independent of learning effects, exposure to political information has been found likely to increase people's political interest, which in turn increases voter turnout (Bartels & Rahn, 2000). Mass-mediated news also provides a valuable resource when it comes to discussing politics. Not only does the news provide citizens with the information necessary to participate in such discussions, but also provides them with a safe way to offer competing perspectives during conversations about controversial issues (Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, & Gil-de-Zúñiga, 2005).

Understanding the emergence of social network sites as an important source of news and political information is therefore both a normatively important and timely endeavour. Yet, despite what we know about news and information consumption, research investigating the democratic implications of social network site news use has, to date, largely been

approached from a citizen journalism perspective (see Chung, 2007 for a review of this literature). This is hardly surprising since social network sites have ‘the potential to trigger a paradigm shift in mass media by challenging the traditional unidirectional flow of messages’ (Chung, 2007, p. 43). In contrast to traditional mass media, social network sites – and social media more generally – have the potential to re-configure communicative power relations. By facilitating social networking and ‘user-generated content,’ citizens are said to be able to challenge the monopoly control of media production and dissemination by state and commercial institutions (Loader & Mercea, 2011; 2012); ‘Equipped with social media, the citizens no longer have to be passive consumers of political party propaganda, government spin or mass media news’ (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 759, but are instead actually enabled to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives and opinions and publish their own news and content.

Not only do social network sites have the potential to disrupt the relational dynamic between citizens and the mass media, neutralising the influence of legacy media over the populace, they also have the potential to disrupt traditional political practices. Against the backdrop of the contemporary media environment, many scholars have called for a fundamental reconsideration of “the political” (Bode, Vraga, Borah, Shah, 2014; Brundidge, 2010; Loader & Mercea, 2011; 2012).

Loader and Mercea (2012), for example, challenge conventional definitions of politics which limit participation to voting, joining a political party or attending a rally. They advocate adopting a more open conception of democratic citizenship, one more attuned to the potential changing perceptions of citizens less inclined to be dutiful and open instead to a more personalized and self-actualizing notion of citizenship (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Similarly, Bode et al. (2014) challenge conventional definitions of political participation in this contemporary media environment. They develop the concept of political social network

site use which can be defined as using a social networking site for explicitly political purposes, like displaying a political preference on one's profile page, or becoming a "fan" or "follower" of a politician (Bode et al., 2014, p. 415).

Just as scholars have challenged conventional definitions of political participation, so too have they challenged notions of political discussion and deliberation. Perhaps most significantly, they have challenged the notion of a Habermasian public sphere (Brundidge, 2010; Loader & Mercea, 2011). Such models of deliberative democracy, which privilege a particular style of 'rational' communication they argue, largely favour white, wealthy males to the exclusion of other identities (Fraser 1990). However, the emergence of social network sites – and social media more generally – as a mainstream form of communication has displaced Habermas's public sphere model and its constrained formulations of rational deliberation with its concomitant requirement for dutiful citizens (Loader & Mercea, 2011). In its place is a greater focus on lifestyle and identity politics (Papacharissi, 2010). Indeed, the very malleability of social media offers the prospect of innovative modes of political communication that may go beyond the constrictions of rational deliberative exchanges. Thus, political self-expression experienced and performed through a variety of text, visual, audio and graphic communication forms may all be regarded as aspects of the political (Loader & Mercea, 2011).

It is hardly surprising that such transformative rhetoric has come to dominate research on the democratic implications of social network sites. After all, '[t]he history of science and technology provides many instances of the fanfare of transformative rhetoric which accompanies the emergence of 'new' innovations' (Loader & Mercea, 2011, pp. 757-758). Unfortunately, however, the "fanfare of transformative rhetoric" which regularly accompanies the emergence of new innovations is often followed by disappointment and a more measured appraisal. Indeed, for all the talk of disrupting and neutralising the influence

of mass media, news circulating on social network sites is still largely produced by professional journalists and legacy news organisations (see Murthy, 2011). What's more, it remains unclear exactly what impact political social network site use may have on real-world political practices in a representative democracy. The present thesis therefore aims to provide a more measured appraisal of the democratic implications of news use on social network sites. Specifically, it investigates the role social network sites play in mediating the role between mass-mediated news and traditional forms of political behaviour. While it acknowledges the transformative potential of these sites, it recognises that their influence on democratic processes is more likely a direct, rather than transformative, one.

This thesis comprises a series of original comparative research papers, each designed to estimate the extent to which the relationship between news consumption and political behaviour is mediated by the unique technological affordances of social network sites. Each individual, but interrelated paper explores how, and to what extent, social network sites transform the way users encounter and/or engage with news content and how this, in turn, shapes their subsequent political behaviour. Consequently, the thesis addresses a pressing need to better understand the democratic implications of the emergence of social network sites as an important source of news and political information.

Each of the individual papers are introduced below. However, it is first necessary to outline and define two key concepts that appear in and inform each of them. The first is that of social network sites. Although most readers will likely be familiar with this concept, it is useful to define from the outset what is meant by this term. The definition provided is admittedly brief and concise, but this is to be expected since constant technological developments make it impossible to provide an exhaustive description of the many hundred social network sites available worldwide. The second concept is that of networked publics. Although this concept is in its relative infancy, and likely unfamiliar to most readers, it is

central to our understanding of how the unique technological affordances of social network sites disrupt and complicate existing patterns of news use and engagement.

Social network sites: a brief definition

Online social network sites are similar to many other genres of social media and other online communities that support computer-mediated communication (Boyd, 2011). What makes social network sites unique, however, is a *combination* of features ‘that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211; Boyd, 2011, p. 43). Although the features, functionality and user bases of social network sites vary greatly, it is the ability to construct a profile that displays and provides access to an articulated list of connections who are also members of the network which distinguishes them from other forms of computer-mediated communication.

Profiles

Upon joining a social network site, users are tasked with generating a profile through which they can be identified and through which they can engage in the sites various functions.

While the amount of information users are encouraged to share on their profile differs significantly across social network sites, most require users to provide a small amount of personal information such as a name, location, and interests. Most also encourage users to upload a photo in order to make their profile more easily identifiable to other members of the system.

In addition to representing users, profiles also serve as the locus of interaction on social network sites (Boyd, 2011). Conversations between users happen on profiles and a person’s profile reflects their engagement with the site (Boyd, 2011). Profiles are also a site

of control, where users can adjust various privacy settings depending on the social network site, in order to determine the visibility of their engagement with the site. Although profiles can be accessible to all users of a given social network site, it is common for participants to limit their visibility, making them “semi-public” (Boyd, 2011).

Friends Lists

Having generated their profile, users are prompted to identify and confirm other users in the system with whom they have an existing relationship or with whom they wish to connect. Although the labels for these connections differ across social network sites, as does the way they are established, a friends list is visible and accessible to anyone who has permission to view that users’ profile (Boyd, 2011).

Friends lists rarely comprise only one’s closest connections. Instead, they commonly consist of current and past friends and acquaintances, as well as a host of peripheral ties that users feel compelled to include or are interested in pursuing (Boyd, 2011; Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012). As a result, individual networks commonly comprise large numbers of users across various social spheres, including immediate and extended family, people from school and university, as well as colleagues, bosses, neighbours and acquaintances (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011).

Social network sites as Networked Publics

In order to appreciate and understand how social network sites may disrupt and complicate existing patterns of news use and engagement, it is useful to think of them as networked publics. The term networked publics was introduced by Mizuko Ito (2008, p. 2) in reference to ‘a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media.’ This concept was revisited by Danah Boyd (2011) who defined networked publics as ‘publics that are restructured by networked

technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.’ Social network sites, therefore, ‘are publics both because of the ways in which they connect people en masse and because of the space they provide for interactions and information. They are networked publics because of the ways in which networked technologies shape and configure them’ (Boyd, 2011, p. 45).

Crucially, networked technologies such as social network sites ‘introduce new affordances for amplifying, recording, and spreading information and social acts’ (Boyd, 2011, p. 45). In doing so, they ‘reorganize how information flows and how people interact with information and each other’ (Boyd, 2011, p. 41). Although Boyd (2011, p. 46) stops short of suggesting that such affordances determine social practices, she acknowledges that networked technologies ‘can play a powerful role in controlling information and configuring interactions.’

Introducing the Papers

When research on a given topic is in its earliest phases, as it is here, establishing evidence of a relationship between two variables is of primary importance. As a research area inevitably evolves, however, its focus tends to shift toward deepening our understanding of the causal processes under investigation. The present thesis epitomises this evolutionary process. It begins with a broad investigation into the relationship between social network site use and political participation. It then continues by exploring a number of the causal processes linking these two variables, specifically as they relate to the role of news and political information on social network sites.

Paper 1: Everyday Social Network Site Use and Political Participation

There is considerable optimism among media commentators that social network sites have the potential to reinvigorate public participation in politics. Consequently, scholars have begun to empirically investigate the relationship between social network site use and political participation (Baumgartner & Morris, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison, & Lampe, 2011; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2011). Generally speaking, this research finds that social network site use positively predicts political participation. Specifically, it finds that social network site users who access political content on these sites are more likely to participate in the political process than non-users and those who use them for other purposes.

Paper 1 aims to contribute to this literature. It does so in two main ways. Firstly, it argues that the motivational approach to social network site use which has so far dominated this literature is limited. Indeed, few social network site users actively choose to attend to any particular type of content when using these sites. Rather, they are simply logging on to find out what other members of their network are sharing (Boyd, 2008). Secondly, it identifies a number of methodological limitations within this literature. It finds that most empirical studies are based on data collected amongst samples of specific sub-populations, such as students and young adults. However, social network sites have gained popularity among all age groups. Although students and young adults were the early adopters of this technology and remain the heaviest users (Dutton & Blank, 2011), it is important to improve our understanding of the relationship between social network site use and political participation across all sectors of society.

It also finds that few studies distinguish between different forms of political participation. This is in spite of recent research which suggests that the use of certain media platforms tends to be associated with engagement in certain political activities (Dylko, 2010;

Gil-de-Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Shulman, 2005). By combining all forms of political participation into a single additive index, the present research potentially underestimates the influence of social network site use on this form of political behaviour.

Paper 1 aims to address these weaknesses in the current literature. Using nationally representative data collected by the UK Oxford Internet Institute (OxIS 2009), it sets out to establish evidence of a relationship between everyday social network site use and various different forms of political participation. It employs a variety of regression techniques to estimate this relationship. It finds that everyday social network site use positively predicts political participation, but only when it comes to signing a petition. Moreover, it finds that users who sign petitions are more likely to do so online than offline. These findings suggest that while social network sites have the potential to increase participation in the political process, any effect is limited to those activities which require minimal commitment and little effort. Thus, their ability to encourage meaningful participation is questionable.

Paper 2: Everyday Social Network Site Use and Political Participation: Estimating the Effect of Inadvertent News and Information Exposure.

Recent research suggests that many social network site users now encounter news content and political information on these sites. Consistent with previous research on the use of other mass media platforms (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Norris, 1996; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), recent studies have found that individuals who access news and political information on social network sites are more likely to participate in politics than those who use them for other purposes (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Valenzuela, 2013; Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison, & Lampe, 2011).

The present paper aims to contribute to, and expand, this growing body of literature. In doing so, it argues that the motivational approach to social network site use, in which users actively chose to attend to particular types of content and expect to gain certain gratifications as a result (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Swanson, 1987), underestimates the fundamental nature of news and information exposure on these sites. Specifically, this approach fails to recognise that the vast majority of social network site users do not actively seek out news and political information when using these sites. Rather, most users who encounter this type of content do so inadvertently, when using these sites for other purposes (Mitchell et al., 2013).

Using nationally representative data collected by the UK Oxford Internet Institute (OxIS, 2011), the present paper estimates the extent to which everyday social network site use influences political participation *via* inadvertently exposing users to news and information. It finds, in short, that everyday uses of social network sites positively predicts inadvertent exposure to news and information. However, such inadvertent exposure does not translate into widespread political participation. In fact, the indirect effect of inadvertent news and information exposure on social network sites is significant only when it comes to buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons.

Paper 3: Deliberation 2.0: Comparing the Deliberative Quality of User Comments across Platforms.

Paper 3 focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will formation that precede participation. After all, a growing body of research indicates that the effects of news and information on participatory behaviour is largely channeled through interpersonal communication (e.g. McLeod et al., 1999; Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, & Gil-de-Zuñiga, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; Shah, Cho, Nah, Gotlieb, Hwang et al., 2007; Scheufele, 2001). According to Scheufele (2001, p. 19),

‘talking about certain issues with other citizens is a necessary condition for fully understanding those issues, for tying them to other, preexisting knowledge, and consequently, for meaningfully participating in political life’ (Scheufele, 2001, p. 19). Put differently, interpersonal communication plays an important role in ‘translating mass-mediated messages into meaningful individual action’ (Scheufele, 2001, p. 29).

News organisations have traditionally played an important role in the deliberative system, not only because they provide citizens with the informational resources needed to deliberate, but because through forums such as letters to the editor they also facilitate communication amongst citizens. Recent developments in the Internet and its associated technologies have consolidated the role of news organisations in the deliberative system. User generated content (UGC) features such as the comment sections attached to news content provide unprecedented opportunities for large numbers of readers to participate in discussion with others about the social and political issues of greatest concern to them. By providing users with a public space in which they can contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise, as well as interact with others, news organisations are opening up opportunities for public deliberation to emerge (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011; Ruiz, Domingo, Micó, Díaz-Noci, Meso, & Masip, 2011; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008).

Just as news organisations are opening up opportunities for deliberation, so too is Facebook. Users who encounter news content on the site are able to comment in much the same way as they would if they accessed it directly through the website. However, recent research suggests that the technological affordances of Facebook may influence the way users comment, and by extension deliberate, on news content they encounter on the site (Burkell, Fortier, Wong, & Simpson, 2014; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Semaan, Robertson, Douglas, & Maruyama, 2014).

Paper 3 tests these claims. It does so using a unique set of data collected directly from the website and Facebook page of the Washington Post. It analyses the content of news user comments from across these two platforms, coding them for various indicators of deliberation. It then compares the deliberative content of direct news user comments with Facebook news user comments. It finds significant differences in the deliberative quality of those who access the news directly and those who access the same news via Facebook. As expected, comments left by direct users exhibited greater deliberative quality than those left by Facebook users.

Paper 4: Civility 2.0: Comparing Incivility in User Comments across Platforms.

Thanks in large part to recent developments in the Internet and its associated technologies, citizens now have more opportunity than ever before to engage in political discussion. Many sceptics believe, however, that the relatively high-level of anonymity that the Internet typically affords users exacerbates disinhibited communicative behaviour. This, they argue, leads to an increase in impolite and uncivil political discussion (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986).

Concerns over anonymity and uncivil communicative behaviour in computer-mediated communication are perhaps best exemplified in the case of news user comments. As implemented by most news organisations, comment sections provide users with a public space at the end of each article in which they are invited to contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise to the content produced by professional journalists (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). Importantly, this feature provides users with a relatively high-level of anonymity. Many commentators and editors believe that this has led to ‘the frequent occurrence of utterly aggressive content posted by some participants’ (Boczkowski, 1999, p. 105). Indeed, according to prominent journalist Leonard Pitts Jr., online comment sections

have become ‘havens for a level of crudity, bigotry, meanness and plain nastiness that shocks the tattered remnants of our propriety’ (Pitts, 2010).

Facebook has been heralded as a potential remedy to this problem (Foxman & Wolf, 2013; Orr, 2011; Wolf, 2011). Unlike most news websites, Facebook users are both identified with and accountable for the content they produce. As Facebook’s “Name Policy” reads, all users are required to use their real name when constructing their profile so that everyone knows exactly who they are connecting with. Users are also encouraged to maintain relatively open and identifiable profiles, through which they can be contacted by other users. This sense of accountability on Facebook is further heightened by the “News Feed” function, which automatically notifies all members of a users’ network when they perform any public activity via their Facebook profile. Commenting on a news article is one such activity.

Paper 4 therefore sets out to identify differences in the level of incivility and politeness that exists between user comments left on Facebook and those left in response to the same content on news websites. Using a unique set of data collected directly from the website and Facebook page of the Washington Post, it analyses the content of user comments, coding them for various indicators of incivility and impoliteness as defined by Papacharissi (2004). It finds significant differences in the level of incivility displayed across platforms. As expected, Facebook comments were more likely to remain civil than website comments. There were no significant differences across platforms in terms of impoliteness.

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Paper1: Everyday Social Network Site Use and Political Participation.

Abstract

Recent research suggests that social network site users are frequently exposed to news and political information, even if they do not typically or actively choose to attend to this type of content. Given what we know about media exposure to news and political information, the present paper sets out to establish evidence of a relationship between *everyday* social network site use and political participation. In doing so, it challenges the motivational approach to social network site use that has been widely adopted within the literature to date. Moreover, it address a number of methodological weaknesses within this literature which limit what we know about everyday social network site use and its potential influence on political participation. Using nationally representative data collected in the United Kingdom by the Oxford Internet Institute, the paper finds that everyday social network site use positively predicts participation, but only in the least time-consuming and lowest-intensity activity; signing a petition. Furthermore, it finds that those who sign petitions are more likely to do so online than offline. The democratic implications of this finding are subsequently discussed.

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Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests that social network sites have the potential to reinvigorate public participation in politics. Barack Obama's success in the 2008 US Presidential Election, for example, has been attributed in part to his use of social network sites during the campaign process. Using Facebook, MySpace, and his very own social network site, MyBarackObama.com, the now two-term president was able to raise funds, attract volunteers, and publicise campaign events far more effectively than his opponent John McCain (Cohen, 2008). Moreover, the Obama campaign was able to effectively engage with young Americans through his use of these sites. As the number of voters under 30 rose by 3.4 million compared with 2004, social network sites are thought to have played a decisive role in Obama's electoral success (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2011).

The use of social network sites has also been implicated in more informal political movements. The so-called Arab Spring, for example, was characterised by the instrumental use of social network sites amongst protesters and organisers. In fact, the prominent use of these sites among activists across the Middle East and North Africa led many commentators to rename the Arab Spring, the "Facebook Revolution" (see Naughton, 2011). Social network site users have played a similarly prominent role in a variety of other political movements worldwide, including in countries such as Iran (Kurzman, 2012), Ukraine (Bohdanova, 2014) and Moldova (Barry, 2009) to name a few.

The present paper contributes to a growing body of empirical literature which investigates the relationship between social network site use and political participation (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison, & Lampe, 2011; Zhang et al., 2011). This literature suggests several means by which social network site use may increase participation, such as exposing users to mobilising content, allowing users to join political

causes, and creating opportunities for users to engage in discussion and debate with other users. In general, this literature reports largely positive findings. Consistent with research on the use of other media platforms (see, for example, McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Norris, 1996; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), it finds that those who use social network sites for informational purposes are more likely to participate in politics than those who use them for other purposes.

The present paper contributes to this literature in two ways. Firstly, it challenges the motivational approach to social network site use that has been widely adopted by many of these studies. Specifically, it argues that this motivational approach, in which users actively choose to attend to particular types of content and expect to gain certain gratifications as a result (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Swanson, 1987), underestimates the fundamental nature of social network site use. Indeed, few users actively choose to attend to particular types of content on social network sites. Rather, a vast majority of them are simply logging on to find out what other members of their network are sharing (Boyd, 2008). Secondly, the present paper identifies a number of fundamental methodological weaknesses identified within this literature. By using nationally representative data collected by the UK's Oxford Internet Institute (OxIS, 2009) to establish evidence of a relationship between *everyday* social network site use and various different forms political participation, it begins to address these limitations.

Internet technology and political participation

The issue of political participation has received considerable attention in recent decades. This is in part because an active citizenry is a vital component of a legitimate and effective democracy (Verba & Nie, 1972), and in part due to an apparent decline in traditional measures of this concept over recent decades. In Britain, for example, voter turnout in the 2001 General Election was just 59 per cent, down 12 percentage points from 1997 and 25

percentage points lower than the post war high of 84 per cent in 1950 (Li & Marsh, 2008). Similarly, in the United States, voter turnout has declined precipitously in recent decades. From a little over 63 per cent in the 1960 Presidential election, turnout fell to just under 49 per cent in 1996, the lowest for a presidential election since 1924.

Although electoral participation has seen somewhat of a renaissance in recent years – turnout in the 2010 UK General election was over 65 per cent, while 69 per cent of voters turned out in the 2008 US Presidential election – it has been suggested that other forms of political participation have also suffered a decline (Putnam, 1995, 2000). Robert Putnam, for example, argues that community involvement and political participation have been on a downward trend in the United States since the 1970s. Indeed, in the two decades between 1973 and 1993, the number of people attending a political speech or rally declined by 36 per cent, the number attending a local meeting on town or school affairs declined by 39 per cent, and those working for a political party reduced by over 50 per cent (Putnam, 1995).

Given the normative importance scholars place on political participation, determining the causes of this decline and understanding what makes people participate has become a central theme in political science. While a long tradition of research has documented the demographic and psychological determinants of voter turnout and political participation (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Piven & Cloward 1983; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), there is also evidence to suggest that media use and developments in communications technology may also play an important role in influencing this type of activity (Baum, 2002; Graber, 2006; Norris, 2000). In particular, recent developments in information and communications technology (ICTs), namely the Internet, have generated considerable attention from scholars interested in its effect on political participation. This interest has largely centred on the

Internet's ability to increase the volume and type of political information that is readily available to the average citizen (Davis, 1999).

Political information is a central resource for democratic participation, one that is essential if citizens are to take effective advantage of the political opportunities afforded them in a democratic society (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). There are several reasons why exposure to political information increases the likelihood that an individual will cast a vote on election-day. Exposure increases political knowledge, which in turn increases turnout because people know where, how, and for whom to vote (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Verba et al., 1995). Independent of learning effects, exposure to political information has also been shown to increase people's campaign interest (Bartels & Rahn, 2000). Interest, in turn, also increase voter turnout (Verba et al., 1995).

Broadly speaking, there exist two schools of thought concerning the potential impact of the Internet on political participation. Internet *optimists* argue that 'changes in the cost and variety of sources of information directly affect levels of political participation' (Bimber, 2003, p. 200). Hence, by reducing the costs associated with acquiring the information necessary to participate, the Internet will create a more informed and engaged public. Consistent with rational choice theories of behaviour, this instrumental approach assumes that any participatory behaviour previously avoided because of cost concerns (such as gathering information, voting, or joining a political association) then becomes more likely under conditions of low-cost or no-cost communication (Xenos & Moy, 2007).

Empirical research offers some support for this approach. Weber, Loumakis and Bergman (2003: 39), for example, conclude from their analysis of Survey2000 data that the Internet, by subsidizing the costs of information acquisition, 'exerts a positive influence on political participation.' Similarly, Kenski and Stroud (2006) find that Internet access and exposure to online presidential campaign information are significantly associated with a

range of political outcome variables, including participation. Tolbert and McNeal (2003) also support this argument, claiming that their analysis of 1996 and 2000 National Election Survey (NES) data suggests that citizens with access to the Internet and, subsequently, online election news, were more likely to report voting in both the 1996 and 2000 elections. In fact, after controlling for a number of other known factors influencing participation, Tolbert and McNeal (2003, p. 175) reported that Internet access and online election news increased the probability of voting in the 2000 election by an average of 12 percent and 7.5 percent respectively.

Despite these findings, Internet *sceptics* remain unconvinced. Instead, they argue that the Internet's ability to stimulate participation depends primarily on the willingness of users to access political information. As the Internet allows users to exercise greater choice over the content and information they consume (Prior, 2005; Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001), sceptics believe that the Internet will simply serve to reinforce existing patterns of political participation (Norris, 2001). Indeed, greater choice and control over media content allows politically interested people to access more political information, ultimately increasing the likelihood they will participate. Yet, those who prefer non-political content, on the other hand, can more easily escape it, therefore encountering even less political information than they may have done previously (Prior, 2005). This is likely to result in a situation where the information rich get richer, while the information poor remain relatively poorer (Brundidge & Rice, 2009).

The vast majority of empirical evidence supports this psychological approach to understanding the effects of Internet use on political participation. Boulianne (2009), in particular, arguably offers the most comprehensive support. In her meta-analysis of studies, which examines 38 studies combining a total of 166 effects, she finds that when political interest is taken into consideration, research tends to find that the relationship between

Internet use and political participation is either not statistically significant, or negligible in terms of its predictive power. Indeed, Bimber (2001) and Norris (2000), for example, both conducted similar analyses of 1998 American National Election Survey (ANES) data, using the same independent (Internet access and campaign information exposure) and dependent (political participation) variables. Having included political interest in his model, Bimber (2001) finds that the only form of participation which is demonstrably connected to Internet use and information exposure is donating money. Norris (2000), on the other hand, having failed to control for political interest, finds a statistically significant relationship beyond simply donating money.

A similar pattern is reflected among a number of other studies, the majority of which find negligible or non-existent relationships between Internet access or online campaign information and political participation when controlling for political interest (Best & Kreuger, 2005; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). In fact, Boulianne (2009, p. 201) finds that only 35% of studies which control for the influence of political interest report statistically significant relationships, although many of these are negligible, suggesting that the availability of political information alone is not enough to stimulate participation if users have little interest in accessing it.

What makes social network sites different?

Online social network sites have introduced new affordances for amplifying, sharing, and spreading information amongst users (Boyd, 2011). Tools such as Facebook's *news feed*, for example, automatically update users with the content being accessed and engaged with by other members of their network. Unlike the Internet, therefore, social network site use is not entirely self-directed. Although there are various mechanisms through which users are able to

exercise some control over the content they encounter on social network sites, these are rarely employed (Rainie & Smith, 2012).

It is the *inadvertent* nature of social network site use that may have a number of important implications when it comes to consuming political information and, by extension, participating in politics. Inadvertent exposure influences both the frequency with which users encounter news and political information, as well as the type of content that is encountered. In terms of frequency, users with little or no interest in politics or public affairs will become more frequently exposed to news content and political information. Indeed, a recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Rainie & Smith, 2012) found that some 75% of social network site users reported that their friends occasionally post some content related to politics. Moreover, 37% of those users that came across political content responded by posting political material themselves. The survey also suggests, importantly, that many of these users were not particularly passionate about politics. This finding was consistent with an earlier survey of US undergraduate students conducted by Vitak et al. (2011) who found that 70 percent of respondents in their sample reported seeing a member of their Facebook network posting a status update mentioning politics in the last seven days. Furthermore, in the week leading up to the survey over half of respondents reported seeing their friends join a political group or “like” a political candidate on Facebook.

Frequent inadvertent exposure to such content may have important implications for political participation. In particular, the relationship between inadvertent exposure to political information and political knowledge has been well documented across a range of political communication settings, including national and local elections (Blumler & McQuail, 1969; Zukin & Snyder, 1984), televised news programmes (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992), and everyday general Internet use (Tewksbury et al., 2001). Although learning from the media has traditionally been viewed as an active process in which people are motivated to seek out

and retain information about specific subjects and important events, research on passive learning has demonstrated that ‘[t]he mere absence of resistance, rather than the presence of motivation and purposive involvement, is all that is necessary for learning to occur’ (Zukin & Snyder, 1984; see also Graber, 1988; Krugman & Hartley, 1970).

It is this form of knowledge, gained through frequent inadvertent exposure to news content and political information, which makes political participation more likely. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review this voluminous literature, the relationship between political knowledge and political participation has been well documented. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) best sum up the importance of political knowledge when it comes to participation when they suggest that political information is a central resource for democratic participation. Indeed, they argue that ‘knowledge about politics is a critical component of citizenship, one that is essential if citizens are able to discern their real interests and take effective advantage of the civic opportunities afforded them’ (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 3).

While the inadvertent nature of social network site use has the potential to increase the volume of news content and political information users encounter, research suggests that it likely influences the type of content users encounter also. Content encountered on social network sites is likely to come from more heterogeneous sources than users are likely to encounter offline or when using the Internet for other purposes (Kim, 2011). While traditional models of information exposure largely presume that individuals seek out news, information and discussion partners that support their existing point of view, and that this trend may be exacerbated by unrestricted information access offered by the Internet (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2001, 2007), Kim (2011) finds that SNS use is significant in predicting respondents’ exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints. This finding was statistically significant even after controlling for partisanship and other media usage. Indeed,

Kim hypothesizes that certain characteristics of social network sites which contribute to inadvertent exposure, such as heterogeneity of user populations, hyperlinks, and interactive communication applications, provide ample opportunity to become exposed to a variety of viewpoints, beliefs, and perspectives that they otherwise would not when using the Internet in other ways.

Like Kim (2011), Messing and Westwood (2012) argue that selective exposure, which occurs more frequently when citizens have greater control over the content they are exposed to, will be substantially less in the context of social media. According to the authors, increased inadvertent exposure to heterogeneous sources of political information occurs more often on social network sites, not only because online networks are themselves more heterogeneous than offline social networks, but also because the content is being shared, or endorsed, by other users in the network, not by news organisations. In such an environment, news consumers do not select their news based on the organisation that disseminates it, but based on other characteristics such as the headline and, most importantly, who else in their network has read it. Messing and Westwood (2012) demonstrate that, in a social media environment, social endorsements are a significantly stronger predictor of content selection than source cues. That is, social network site users base their decision of what content to engage with on *who* shared it, rather than who produced it. Thus, readers place less emphasis on the ideological congruency of content, and more on which of their friends it is associated with.

Exposure to varied and cross-cutting viewpoints has been widely touted as beneficial for effective democracy, particularly when it stimulates political discussion. Indeed, while political talk *per se* may be valuable, it is political talk that involves exchange of dissimilar perspectives that it especially beneficial to individuals and society at large (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). When citizens discuss politics with others who do not share their same views

and opinions, they are not only exposed to information that they might otherwise avoid, thus increasing their knowledge of an event or issue, but they might also be encouraged to think about it in different ways and become more tolerant of differing points-of-view.

Social network sites and political participation

Consistent with previous research on Internet use, much of the literature on social network site use has adopted a largely motivational approach. Despite the potential for inadvertent exposure on social network sites, this approach assumes that media users actively choose to attend to particular types of content and expect to gain certain gratifications as a result (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Swanson, 1987). Consequently, a number of studies have established evidence of a positive relationship between informational/political uses of social network sites and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Park et al., 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Vitak et al., 2011). These studies find, unsurprisingly, that those who use social network sites to access political or informational content are more likely to participate in politics than those who use these sites for other purposes.

However, as previously highlighted, few users actively choose to attend to particular types of content on social network sites. Thus, these previous findings tell us little about the potential effect that these sites may have on political participation amongst the wider population. Fortunately, for the purposes of the present paper, a number of these studies also include measures of everyday uses of social network sites in their analyses (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Vitak et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2011). However, given the relative infancy of this research area, the findings are subject to a number of other important methodological limitations.

Firstly, only one of these studies distinguishes between different forms of political participation (see Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Although it is typical for researchers

studying political participation to combine all activities into a single additive index, doing so potentially underestimates or misrepresents the extent or level of one's participation in politics (Dylko, 2010). For instance, by combining all political activities into an additive index of participation, it is possible that those who participate most frequently are portrayed as less engaged than those who partake in a greater variety of political acts, but who do so less frequently (Dylko, 2010).

The use of additive indices is particularly problematic when studying the relationship between media use and political participation. This is because recent research suggests that certain media platforms, namely the Internet, typically engender certain participatory behaviours (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Morozov, 2009). While the Internet has greatly reduced the barriers to political information that may inhibit participation, it has also provided a platform *through* which users can engage in politics. Participatory behaviours such as signing a petition can now be performed, relatively easily, online.

Such is the potential for the Internet to engender this type of participatory behaviour, the neologism *slacktivism* has emerged to describe this form of political engagement. Slacktivism is a morphem formed from the words slacker and activism and is commonly used to describe online political participation such as signing an e-petition. Slacktivism is typically used in a pejorative sense to demean engagement in activities that require minimal effort on the respondent's behalf (Christensen, 2011). It refers to participatory behaviours that are easily performed, but are done so more to help one feel better than to effect political change (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009).

Baumgartner and Morris's (2010) study of social network site use and political participation establish evidence to support the disaggregation of political participation within the literature on social network site use. As the slacktivism literature suggests, their analysis

finds that general social network site use is related to an increase in political participation, but the relationship is evident only among low-intensity forms of participation. In short, Baumgartner and Morris found that compared to non-users, general social network site users were more likely to post online messages expressing their political opinions, forward political links or emails, and sign an email or web petition. However, there was no evidence to suggest that general social network site use was related to more intensive forms of political participation such as writing or telephoning a politician.

The use of additive indices to measure political participation may in part explain the null and negative findings reported in other studies of social network site use and political participation who measure their dependent variable using an additive index (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Vitak et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2010). Vitak et al. (2011) highlight this potential flaw in their research design. In their attempt to predict political participation using political uses of Facebook, the authors also include a measure of everyday use known as the Facebook intensity scale (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). This scale combines items measuring time spent on the social network and the number of friends a user has, with users' psychological orientation toward the site. Vitak et al. (2011) found that this scale was negatively correlated with general political participation, such that intensity of everyday Facebook use was associated with a *decrease* in participatory behaviours. Although the authors acknowledge that the most common forms of political participation amongst their respondents tended to be those that required the least effort and intensity, they fail to disaggregate the various forms of participation comprising their participation index. Yet they interpret the negative relationship between intensity of everyday Facebook use and political participation as evidence that users are engaging in certain forms of low-intensity political participation that are not included within their scale. Indeed, they even go so far as to suggest

that the most intense Facebook users may even be ‘classic slacktivists’ (Vitak et al., 2011, p. 113), although they stop short of testing this assumption.

Another limitation of the current literature relates to the sample upon which many of the findings are based. Most of this literature focuses on the relationship between social network site use and political participation among students or young adults, particularly in the United States (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Vitak et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2011).

Moreover, many of these samples are not nationally representative, but rather samples representing the student body in certain large US universities (Vitak et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2011). Only Gil-de-Zúñiga et al. (2012) collect data from a sample of the national US population.

The rationale for such sampling strategies is twofold. Firstly, most researchers have convenient access to student samples via their institutional affiliation. Student samples are both quickly and cheaply assembled therefore. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, students were the early adopters of this technology and remain the heaviest users of social network sites (Dutton & Blank, 2011; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that much of the research to date has focused on this particular cohort. However, in recent years students have not been the primary source of growth in social network site use. In the UK, for example, the rate of growth among younger users has reached a plateau. The rate of growth in social network site use has instead increased most among 25-64 year olds. In fact, social network site use has doubled amongst those aged 65 and above, although it remains relatively low at around 20 percent (Dutton & Blank, 2011, p. 36). This trend is evident in the US also (Hampton et al., 2011). In light of these findings, it is essential to improve our understanding of the relationship between social network sites and political participation among all sectors of the population, not just students and young adults.

The present paper aims to address both of these issues. As described in greater detail below, it uses nationally representative data to estimate the relationship between everyday social network site use and various forms of political participation. In doing so, it aims to contribute an element of both internal and external validity that has been identified as lacking within the current literature. In light of the findings within this literature, however, it posits the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: Everyday social network site use positively predicts political participation, particularly in those activities which require the least effort and commitment.

Methodology

Data

This study uses data taken from the 2009 Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS), conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute on a sample of 2013 respondents. The survey has been conducted every other year since 2003 and is designed to provide an insight into Internet access, use, and attitudes in the United Kingdom. The survey uses a multi-stage national probability sample and has an average response rate of almost 70 percent. Around 70 percent of all respondents in 2009 were Internet users, half of whom report having created or updated a social network profile (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009).

This cross-sectional data set was selected not only because it is the only one of its kind available in the UK for public use and therefore represents a unique opportunity for researchers in this field, but also because it provides a representative view of the UK population as a whole. As previously discussed, external validity of this kind is missing in many of the studies mentioned above.

While many scholars claim that the relationship between media use and political behaviour is largely unidirectional, leading from media use to participation (Boulianne, 2009; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002), our analysis of cross-sectional data prevents us from making causal claims regarding this relationship. Yet, for causation to exist, it is first necessary to establish that correlation is present.

Measures

Independent

The aim of this research is to determine whether use of social network sites is related to political participation. It is based on the assumption that social network sites expose users to information and content they might otherwise not come across when using the Internet in other ways. According to this assumption, therefore, we would expect that the more time respondents spend using social network sites, the more likely it is that they would come across political information and discussion and, subsequently, participate in the political process. Alternatively, if our theory does not hold, we will find a negative relationship between social network site use and political participation, or no relationship at all. Our independent variable thus measures the frequency with which respondents access their social network site profile. Specifically, OxIS 2009 asks respondents: *How often do you use the Internet to update or create a profile on a social networking site?* (QC10i). Responses ranged from 'Several times a day', through to 'Daily', 'Weekly', 'Monthly', 'Less than monthly' or 'Never'.

Dependent

As we have seen, political participation goes beyond simply voting in an election. In fact, political participation, in this instance, is defined as any action by citizens specifically aimed at influencing decisions taken by public representatives and elected officials regarding public

policy. This definition of participation fits in conveniently with the Oxford Internet Survey which asks respondents whether or not, in the last 12 months, they have (a) *Contacted a politician, government or local government official*, (b) *Joined a political party*, (c) *Joined another civic organisation or association such as those involved in environmental or human rights campaigns*, (d) *Signed a petition*, (e) *Taken part in a lawful public demonstration*, (f) *Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical, or social reasons*, and (g) *Donated money to a political organisation or group* (QP2).

Respondents were also asked whether or not these activities were performed offline only, online only, or both online and offline. This is particularly important as the Internet becomes a mainstream avenue for political participation. Indeed, in terms of popularity, some online forms of political participation now rival traditional forms; for example, nearly as many U.S. residents contact elected officials over the Internet as do by post and telephone (Best & Kreuger, 2005). Consequently, any attempt to measure participation must take in to account both online and offline forms of participation.

Rather than create a participation index, as most prior research has done, each form of participation represents an individual binary dependent variable to be entered into a logistic regression. Indeed, the literature tells us that certain forms of political participation were found to be more likely related to social network site use than others. For example, we would expect to find a stronger relationship between everyday social network site use and signing a petition than working for a political party. Thus, a series of independent models containing binary dependent variables was deemed beneficial. Respondents who had performed an activity, whether online, offline, or both, were coded 1, and respondents who had not performed an activity were coded 0.

Any binary dependent variable found to be significantly predicted by social network site use was then entered into a multinomial logistic regression model containing the same

independent and control variables. This type of analysis allows us to predict which values of the dependent variable are associated with social network site use when there are more than two categories. Given that our dependent variables contain four categories (No, Online only, Offline only, and Both online and offline), multinomial logistic regression allows us to predict whether the use of these sites is more likely to predict online participation, offline participation, or a combination of both, given that these categories cannot be meaningfully ranked. The original variables as coded by the Oxford Internet Survey were therefore used for this second type of analysis.

Unfortunately, for the purposes of this study, the Oxford Internet Survey did not collect information on respondents voting behaviour. While this is clearly beyond our control, it does somewhat limit our findings. Just as any study measuring participation must go beyond simple voter turnout, ideally it should not be at its expense.

Control measures

In order to increase confidence in our findings, and increase the validity of any inferences made herein, we must be sure that any relationship between social network site use and political participation we might uncover is not caused by other factors. In order to do this, we must control for the influence of variables commonly known to affect participation. The literature on political participation is vast and well-known so an in-depth discussion is not necessary here. Yet, it is important to note which variables are most relevant and to be included in our models.

Leading behavioural theories of political participation have shown that socio-economic characteristics – namely income and education – are the most influential factors determining political participation (see, among others, Campbell et al., 1960). Participation has also been found to be influenced by other demographic variables such as age and gender,

as well as attitudinal variables including political interest and political efficacy (Piven & Cloward, 1983; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

While variables such as income, education and age are easy to quantify, attitudinal variables such as efficacy and interest are slightly more complex, relying instead on respondents to place themselves on a multi-item scale according to their own understanding of the question. Political efficacy, according to Campbell et al. (1954, p. 187), is defined as ‘the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change.’ In the 2009 OxIS, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement; *Government does not care much what people like me think.* (QP4d). Their responses to this question are used to form an efficacy scale which is included in each of the models.

Like political efficacy, political interest is measured by self-reported responses to the question; *How interested would you say you are in politics?* (QP1). Responses to this question ranged from “Not at all” through to “Very interested” on a 4-item scale. This is a particularly important variable, both because political interest is strongly related to political participation (Verba et al., 1995), and because of the mediating effect political interest often has in models containing traditional measures of Internet use and engagement.

Findings

Table 1.1 presents the results of a series of logistic regression models estimating the relationship between a number of independent variables and a variety of political activities. The coefficients in the first row refer to the relationship between social network site use and political participation, independent of the effects of the other variables included in the model. Contrary to our assumption, there is little evidence to suggest that everyday social network site use may translate into widespread political participation. However, the findings offer

Table 1.1. Predicting political participation.

	Contact official	Join political party	Join civic org.	Sign petition	Rally / Protest	Boycott	Donate to party / issue
SNS	1.067 (.347)	1.174 (.446)	.910 (.466)	1.129 (.017)	.984 (.887)	1.007 (.902)	.931 (.565)
Age	1.266 (.000)	.988 (.940)	.824 (.064)	1.137 (.004)	1.043 (.644)	1.073 (.161)	1.035 (.734)
Education	1.520 (.000)	1.599 (.100)	1.960 (.000)	1.360 (.000)	1.443 (.017)	1.208 (.026)	1.685 (.002)
Income	.983 (.804)	.437 (.001)	.729 (.009)	.948 (.314)	.787 (.029)	1.039 (.529)	.884 (.285)
Gender	1.123 (.556)	2.866 (.138)	1.322 (.447)	.921 (.583)	1.656 (.122)	.652 (.015)	1.107 (.766)
Interest	2.519 (.000)	7.846 (.000)	3.871 (.000)	1.901 (.000)	2.250 (.000)	2.388 (.000)	2.048 (.000)
Efficacy	.895 (.247)	.771 (.399)	.983 (.917)	.930 (.320)	1.088 (.570)	1.028 (.743)	1.090 (.587)
Constant	-4.881	-8.203	-5.493	-2.587	-4.998	-3.152	-5.317
R ² _N	.247	.371	.246	.160	.133	.185	.124
N	932	935	935	939	936	937	936
H-L (sig.)	.789	.551	.841	.029	.913	.226	.045

Cell entries are odds ratios. *p*-values are in displayed in parentheses.

H-L (sig.) = Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test statistic *p*-value.

partial support for the hypothesis. When controlling for other well-known predictors of participation, social network site use is significant (*p* .017), although not particularly substantive (β .122), when it comes to signing a petition. In fact, the odds ratio presented in Table 1.1 (1.129) suggests that a one unit increase in the use of social network sites, according to our measurement scale, increases the odds of signing a petition by a factor of 1.12. When interpreting odds ratios, if the value exceeds 1 then the odds of an outcome

occurring increase. However, if the value is less than 1, the relationship between our independent and dependent variables is negative. Although the relationship is substantively weak, it does corroborate recent research on social network site use among students (Baumgartner and Morris, 2011) which finds a relationship between general use of these sites and low-intensity forms of political participation.

While this finding is interesting, we must be cautious given that the overall model is not a particularly good fit for the data. The Hosmer and Lemeshow (H-L) goodness-of-fit test statistic, which assesses overall model fit, finds that the model in which petition signing acts as the dependent variable is significant (.029), meaning that observed values differ significantly from our model predicted values. Well-fitting models are those in which the Hosmer and Lemeshow test statistic is greater than .05.

Given the widespread use of social network sites among politicians, it is surprising to find that their use among the public is not related to contacting officials. Indeed, contacting elected officials on social network sites, like signing petitions, is a relatively low-cost form of participation. Yet, when modelled alongside our control variables, the relationship between social network site use and contacting officials is insignificant ($p = .347$), perhaps because this form of participation requires more time and effort than simply signing a petition. Similarly, the use of these sites is not significantly related to any of the other more costly forms of participation included in our model. The lack of relationship between social network site use and political participation, beyond signing a petition, allows us therefore, in large part, to reject our hypothesis.

Although Table 1.1 suggests that social network site use is related to low-cost, effortless activities such as signing petitions, the results of a multinomial logistic regression analysis presented in Table 1.2 provide more evidence to support this claim. According to these results, everyday social network site use is associated with both online *only* petition

Table 1.2. Predicting modes of petition signing.

			95% Confidence Interval for Odds Ratios	
	<i>B</i>	Exp (B)	Lower	Upper
<i>Offline only vs. No</i>				
SNS	-.003	.997 (.960)	.872	1.138
Age	.115	1.122 (.043)	1.004	1.254
Edu	.207	1.230 (.030)	1.020	1.483
Income	-.137	.872 (.046)	.762	.998
Gender	.520	1.681 (.008)	1.144	2.471
Interest	.567	1.763 (.000)	1.418	2.191
Efficacy	.032	1.032 (.734)	.860	1.239
Intercept	-3.090			
<i>Online only vs. No</i>				
SNS	.247	1.280 (.002)	1.098	1.493
Age	.179	1.196 (.010)	1.044	1.371
Edu	.464	1.590 (.000)	1.268	1.995
Income	.094	1.099 (.254)	.935	1.292
Gender	-.681	.506 (.005)	.314	.816
Interest	.699	2.012 (000)	1.545	2.621
Efficacy	-.211	.810 (.065)	.647	1.013
Intercept	-4.559			
<i>Both offline and online vs. No</i>				
SNS	.227	1.255 (.011)	1.052	1.496
Age	.087	1.091 (.269)	.935	1.272
Edu	.311	1.365 (.024)	1.042	1.787
Income	-.077	.926 (.420)	.796	1.116
Gender	.128	1.137 (.639)	.665	1.944
Interest	.786	2.196 (.000)	1.609	2.997
Efficacy	-.119	.888 (.375)	.683	1.154
Intercept	-4.372			

$R^2_N = .189$ Model $\chi^2 = 173.475$ *p*-values are in parentheses.

signing, as well as with a combination of online *and* offline petition signing. Everyday use of these sites is not significantly related to *offline only* petition signing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, political interest remains the strongest predictor of political participation across all of our models.

Discussion

Recent research has established evidence of a positive relationship between social network site use and political participation. Based largely on the assumption that social network sites provide users with more frequent and convenient access to political content than ever before, it finds that those who access such content on these sites are more likely to participate than those who use them for other purposes. The present paper sets out to contribute to this literature in a number of ways. Firstly, it argues that the motivational approach to social network site use that has been widely adopted within this literature underestimates the fundamental nature of exposure to political content on these sites. Few users actively choose to attend to particular types of content on social network sites. Rather, a vast majority of them are simply logging on to find out what other members of their network are sharing (Boyd, 2008). In doing so, they are inadvertently exposed to political content. The present paper therefore addresses a pressing need to better understand the participatory behaviour of *everyday* social network site users, not just those who use these sites for political purposes.

Secondly, it contributes an element of both internal and external validity that is identified as lacking within the current research. It uses a nationally representative sample of the UK population to estimate the relationship between everyday social network site use and various different forms of political participation. Although it is typical for researchers attempting to predict political participation to combine the various activities into a single additive index, the present paper argues that this too has the potential to underestimate, or at

least misrepresent the relationship under investigation. Indeed, research suggests that certain media platforms are more closely related to certain forms of political participation than others (Dylko, 2010; Shah, Kwak, Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, Yoon, 2001; Morozov, 2009). This is particularly true of the Internet which offers users new ways to participate in politics online. Thus it is essential if we are to better understand the relationship between online media use and political participation to disaggregate participation indices into their constituent parts.

Using nationally representative data collected by the UK's Oxford Internet Institute, the present paper sets out to estimate the relationship between everyday social network site use and various different forms of political participation. The findings suggest that everyday uses of social network sites have a limited impact on political participation. In short, everyday social network site use is related to political participation, but only when it comes to signing a petition. Moreover, this relationship is significant only when we include signing a petition online. At best, therefore, it appears that everyday social network site use is associated with the very lowest-intensity forms of political participation.

These findings will no doubt contribute to rising concerns over the negative impact that the Internet and its associated technologies are having on political and civic life (Hindman, 2009; Shulman, 2009). As people increasingly turn away from conventional forms of political participation to embrace more slacktivist forms such as signing an e-petition, there is concern that they are doing so to feel good about themselves, rather than to effect political change (Christensen, 2011; Klafka, 2010).

However, while it is possible that slacktivism is supplanting traditional forms of political participation, it is equally possible that engaging in even the least time-consuming political activities may have a positive effect on an individual's wider participation. Signing an e-petition for example may represent a first step in raising an individual's political

awareness and interest. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that petition signing may lead to a subsequent increase in other forms of political participation, such as voter turnout. In fact, when estimating the relationship between petition signing and voting, it was most substantive amongst the most sporadic participants as opposed to the most regular (Parry et al., 2012). Even those who sign petitions infrequently therefore may still become more engaged in the long-run.

That no correlation was found between everyday social network site use and the other participation indicators is equally interesting in itself. Although it shows that social network site use does not lead to political participation beyond signing a petition, it also demonstrates that online social network sites are not being used by the most politically engaged to carry out their participatory activities, despite the fact that many politicians and election campaigners see these sites as a potential avenue to communicate with and mobilize citizens (Guergueiva, 2008).

One potential explanation for these largely null findings may be that political participation has simply changed. Traditional measures of participation, which have stayed the same for decades, may no longer be relevant to modern day political participation. For example, one participation item in the Oxford Internet Survey asks respondents whether or not they have taken part in a lawful demonstration within the last 12 months. Strictly speaking, therefore, demonstrators who took part in the Arab Spring movements or the 2011 Summer riots in the United Kingdom for example would be forced to answer 'No' to this question as the demonstrations were deemed illegal. Thus their participation was not part of a 'lawful' demonstration.

Similarly, when it comes to contacting officials, social network sites offer a convenient and efficient mode of communication between citizens and their representatives. However, sites such as Facebook offer a variety of unique ways for citizens and politicians to

communicate, transforming the way many users conceptualise contact. For instance, users need not write a formal letter or email their representatives to raise concerns or praise them for their performance on particular issues. Instead, Facebook users can simply “like” or “recommend” a page, profile, or issue stance in order to convey their pleasure or support for their representative. Simply clicking a “like” button may not be what many respondents consider contacting an official. They too would then answer ‘No’ when asked if, in the last 12 months, they had contacted an elected official or representative.

Given these considerations, more research is required before we can more confidently rule out the existence of a relationship between social network site use and political participation. This research should be primarily guided by the apparent lack of quality representative data and the use of alternative methods designed to disentangle any causal mechanisms involved in this relationship. It should also contain more nuanced indicators of political participation given the various forms of engagement with the political process that are now available to citizens via social network sites. Yet, our tentative findings suggest that, on the surface, social network sites might not serve to reinvigorate political participation.

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Paper 2: Everyday Social Network Site Use and Political Participation: Estimating the Effect of Inadvertent News and Information Exposure.

Abstract

Consistent with previous research on informational uses of the mass media, recent research suggests that individuals who use social network sites to access news and political information are more likely to participate in politics than those who use these sites for other purposes. However, few users actively choose to attend to this type of content on social network sites. Rather, news and information consumption on these sites largely occurs inadvertently, as a by-product of everyday use. The present paper therefore challenges the motivational approach to social network site use that has dominated this research. In doing so, it sets out to establish evidence of a relationship between inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites and political participation. Using nationally representative data collected by the UK's Oxford Internet Institute, it finds that everyday use

of social network sites positively predicts inadvertent exposure to news and information, but such inadvertent exposure does not translate into widespread political participation.

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Introduction

A recent survey conducted on behalf of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford (Newman & Levy, 2013) found that social network sites have become a regular source of news content and information for many people. In fact, 45 percent of the survey's respondents in Spain, for example, claimed that social network sites represent one of the *main* ways they come across news, followed by 38 percent of respondents in Italy and 22 percent in Denmark. Even in the United Kingdom, where big brands such as the BBC dominate the online news market (Newman & Levy, 2013), social network sites represent an important source of news for almost one fifth of respondents (Newman & Levy, 2013, p. 61).

The number of people accessing news on social network sites in the United States is equally remarkable. Indeed, a recent survey by the Pew Internet & American Life project (Mitchell, Kiley, Gottfried, & Guskin, 2013) found that almost half of all adults who use Facebook in the United States have encountered news in some form on the site. Given Facebook's widespread popularity, this equates to roughly 30 percent of the country's entire adult population.

Recent research has established evidence of a positive relationship between exposure to news content on social network sites and political participation. Consistent with previous

research on informational uses of other mass media platforms (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Norris, 1996; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), these studies find that individuals who use social network sites to search for news content are significantly more likely to engage in political activities than those who use these sites for other purposes (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Valenzuela, 2013; Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison, & Lampe, 2011).

The present paper aims to contribute to, and expand, this growing body of literature. It does so in recognition that the current motivational approach to the study of social network sites, in which users actively chose to attend to particular types of content and expect to gain certain gratifications as a result (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Swanson, 1987), underestimates the fundamental nature of exposure to news and information on these sites. Specifically, it argues, this approach fails to recognise that the vast majority of social network site users do not actively seek out news and political information when using these sites, even if they do personally consider such content useful or enjoyable (Boyd, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2013). Rather, most users who encounter news and political information on social network sites do so inadvertently, when using these sites for other purposes (Mitchell et al., 2013).

The present paper therefore sets out to establish evidence of a relationship between *inadvertent* exposure to news and information on social network sites and participation in a variety of political activities. Using nationally representative data collected in the United Kingdom by the Oxford Internet Institute, it finds that everyday social network site use does lead to greater inadvertent exposure to news and information. However, such exposure does not translate into widespread political participation.

News media and political participation

Political information is a central resource for democratic participation, one that is essential if citizens are to take effective advantage of the political opportunities afforded them in a democratic society. Indeed, exposure to political information has been found to promote increased political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and increased political interest (Bartels & Rahn, 2000), both of which are associated with increases in political participation (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Political information has also been found to provide an important resource for political discussion (Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2005) which in itself raises political knowledge and interest, thereby further promoting increased political participation (McLeod et al., 1999; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

As the primary source of political information for most people (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Graber, 1988), mass mediated news has become a critical component of democratic participation. Consequently, a great deal of research has focused considerable attention on the ability of the mass media to provide citizens with the information necessary to participate in democratic life. This research tends to treat the relationship between news media exposure and political participation in one of two ways (Xenos & Moy, 2007). One way is to treat news media as having a causal effect on political participation. This approach assumes that the news media shapes users' sense of civic duty, attention to political issues, interest in public affairs, and ultimately their motivation to participate in the political process (Boulianne, 2011). Referred to by Norris (2001) as mobilisation, this approach is evident in a number of studies investigating the effect of Internet use on political participation (e.g. Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Weber, Loumakis, & Bergman, 2003).

The other way to think about the relationship between news media exposure and political participation is to view users as having greater autonomy in choosing content which meets their pre-existing needs. Consistent with the uses and gratifications theory (Norris,

2000), this represents a more motivational approach to the study of media use, in which individuals actively choose to attend to particular types of content and expect to gain certain gratifications as a result (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Swanson, 1987). In short, those who are predisposed to participate in the political process use news media to do so more effectively. Norris (2001) refers to this process as reinforcement.

Since the Internet is largely a self-directed medium (Boulianne, 2011) which affords users considerable control over the content they consume (Prior, 2005; Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001), the uses and gratifications approach has come to dominate research on the relationship between online news media use and political participation in recent years (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Shah, Kwak, Holbert, 2001; Xenos & Moy, 2007). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that this approach has also informed recent research into the relationship between online social network site use and political participation. Indeed, a number of studies have examined the relationship between social network site news use and political participation in recent years (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Holt et al., 2013; Park et al., 2009; Valenzuela, 2013; Vitak et al., 2011), with each reporting evidence of a positive association.

Unlike more conventional uses of the Internet and its associated technologies, the present paper argues that social network site use is *not* self-directed. In fact, it suggests that when it comes to news and information exposure on social network sites, users exercise little control over the content they consume. Consequently, as more people spend more time using social network sites, the usefulness of examining the motivations of users is somewhat limited. Instead, such an online environment merits a re-examination of inadvertent exposure to news and information and its mobilising potential, as opposed to the purposeful and motivated approach that has, to date, dominated this small but increasingly important literature.

(Inadvertent) news and information exposure on social network sites

Online social network sites have introduced new affordances for amplifying, sharing, and spreading information amongst users (Boyd, 2011). Tools such as Facebook's "news feed" function, for example, automatically update users with information regarding the activities of other members within their network and the content that is being shared amongst them.

Although there are ways for users to exert some control over the content they are exposed to, or more precisely to block content from certain users within their network, research suggests that such controls are rarely employed (Rainie & Smith, 2012). As a result, social network site users are regularly exposed to content that they themselves might otherwise choose to avoid, or at least not actively seek out when using the Internet for other purposes.

Recent survey research suggests that such inadvertent exposure is commonplace amongst social network site users when it comes to news content and political information. Indeed, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Journalism Project (Mitchell et al., 2013) found that the vast majority of social network site users who reported encountering news content did so inadvertently, when using these sites for other purposes. Focusing solely on Facebook – the world's largest social network site – the survey found that just four percent of users who encountered news considered the site to be the most important platform through which they get news. Moreover, just 18 percent considered the site to be a useful way to get news. The remaining 78 percent, however, encountered news on Facebook inadvertently when using the site for other reasons.

It is the inadvertent nature of social network sites that exposes more people to a greater amount of news and information than they may previously have been used to. The more time one spends on social network sites, the more likely it is that they will become exposed to news and information there. In fact, Mitchell et al. (2013) found that two-thirds

(67 percent) of those who use Facebook for at least an hour each day get news there, compared with only 41 percent of those who spend less than an hour a day on the site. Similarly, around two-thirds (68 percent) of those who check Facebook regularly throughout the day get news on the site, compared with just a third (32 percent) of those who check Facebook from time to time.

While these findings establish evidence of a new type of news consumer, a “stumbler” so to speak (Baresch, Knight, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011), the homophily principle presents an important theoretical limitation. According to the homophily principle, personal social networks are largely homogeneous with regard to many socio-demographic, behavioural, and intrapersonal characteristics (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Since social networks comprise people who share similar characteristics and interests, users are unlikely to be exposed to content that they otherwise would not be. Indeed, according to Boyd (2008) most people are simply logging in to their social network profile to hang out with people they already know. Social network sites from this perspective are therefore simply offering new ways to access the same old content.

Evidence supporting this argument comes from the very same survey which suggests that social network site use increases inadvertent exposure, even amongst those with little to no interest in the news (Mitchell et al., 2013). In fact, this survey found that three-quarters (75 percent) of respondents in the above survey reported that the news they encounter on Facebook is news they have already encountered in other places. This is hardly surprising, according to Thompson (2014), since social network sites simply reflect the interests and habits of their users. Indeed, Facebook does not make the news feed, for example. Rather, the friends and pages users follow contribute every story. Facebook simply organizes them with a machine-learning algorithm that studies users past behaviour to predict what stories should

appear at the top. Since users choose their friends, and their interactions with their friends' posts, it is hardly a stretch to say that users choose their own news feed (Thompson, 2014).

While this is undoubtedly true, it has been argued recently that the homophily principle in *online* social networks does little to influence the type of content that users are exposed to. This argument is based on findings which suggest that *online* social networks comprise large numbers of weak-ties, as opposed to *offline* social networks which tend to consist of a small number of strong-ties (Bakshy, 2012; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). According to the Theory of Weak Ties (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1375), 'those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different to that which we [would normally] receive.' Within social networks, therefore, large numbers of weak ties provide access to a rich source of new information that many users potentially would not or could not access for themselves (Bakshy, 2012; Christakis & Fowler, 2011).

Given these theoretical considerations, it is necessary to first establish evidence of a relationship between everyday social network site use and inadvertent exposure to news and information. Hence, the following hypothesis is posited:

Hypothesis 1: Everyday social network site use is positively related to inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites.

(Inadvertent) exposure and political participation

The mobilising potential of news and information exposure takes on many forms. Perhaps most notably, previous research finds that media exposure to news and information encourages participation by increasing users' knowledge of the important issues facing society and the best way to go about addressing these pressing issues. Knowledge about

politics is a critical component of citizenship, one that is essential if citizens are to discern their real interests and take effective advantage of the civic opportunities afforded them (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 3). In fact, [t]he less informed one is... the less likely one is to participate, and the less likely it is that one's participation will be effective (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 9).

Although information acquisition and learning from the media has traditionally been viewed as an active process in which people are motivated to seek out and retain information about specific subjects and important events, research on passive learning has demonstrated that '[t]he mere absence of resistance, rather than the presence of motivation and purposive involvement, is all that is necessary for learning to occur' (Zukin & Snyder, 1984). Although a captive audience, or an inadvertent audience in the case of social network site users, may not exhibit the same political interest as a self-selected one and therefore may not learn as much, a large body of research suggests that even unmotivated exposure can produce learning (Graber, 1988; Keeter & Wilson 1986; Krugman & Hartley 1970; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Tewksbury et al., 2001; Tian & Robinson, 2009; Zukin & Snyder 1984). Indeed, inadvertent exposure to news and political information has been shown to inform inattentive audiences and raise awareness of political issues amongst even the most entertainment-oriented media users (Baum, 2002; 2003; Baum & Jamison, 2006).

Research also suggests that the mobilising effect of *inadvertent* exposure to news and information on social network sites may be explained in part by the diversity of content being shared amongst users. Since online social networks often comprise large numbers of weak ties, users may more commonly encounter diverse content from various social spheres within their personal network. This so-called *cross-cutting exposure* (Mutz, 2006) has positive democratic implications. Those who are exposed to multiple perspective and differing points of view are likely to be more politically tolerant (Mutz, 2006). Similarly, cross-cutting

exposure helps individuals to better understand other perspectives and learn from them (Ikeda & Boase, 2011). This, in turn, has the potential to stimulate political participation.

Much of the research on cross-cutting exposure and political participation has focused on heterogeneity in discussion networks (Ikeda & Boase, 2011; Mutz, 2006; Quintelier, Stolle, & Harell, 2012). This introduces an additional mobilising effect of news exposure; interpersonal communication. News and information provides a valuable resource for individuals engaging in political discussion (Rojas et al., 2005). Media content not only provides citizens with the information necessary to engage in political discussion, but it also provides a safe way to offer perspectives during discussion about potentially controversial issues (Rojas et al., 2005). This is particularly important since ‘talking about certain issues with other citizens is a necessary condition for fully understanding those issues, for tying them to other, preexisting knowledge, and consequently, for meaningfully participating in political life’ (Scheufele, 2001, p. 19). Simply put, interpersonal communication plays an important role in ‘translating mass-mediated messages into meaningful individual action’ (Scheufele, 2001, p. 29).

Since the present paper focuses on inadvertent exposure to news and information, as opposed to motivated exposure, it is not expected that the mobilising effect of this content will be as widespread as this vast literature suggests. Consequently, the following hypothesis is posited:

Hypothesis 2: Inadvertent news exposure is positively related to political participation.

The indirect effect of inadvertent news exposure

The hypotheses posited thus far suggest that the relationship between everyday social network site use and political participation is, to some extent, indirect. In short, everyday

social network site use influences political participation through inadvertently exposing users to news and information.

In addition to the direct effects outlined in the previous two hypotheses, the present study estimates the indirect effect of social network site use on political participation through inadvertent exposure to news and information. In doing so, it distinguishes between the direct effect of everyday social network site use on political participation, and the *indirect* effect of everyday social network site use on political participation *via* inadvertent exposure to news and information. In light of H₁ and H₂, the following is posited:

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between everyday social network site use and political participation is explained, in part, by inadvertent exposure to news and information.

Methodology

Data

This study analyses data taken from the 2011 Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) (Dutton & Blank, 2011). Launched by the Oxford Internet Institute in 2003, OxIS has become an authoritative source of information about Internet access, use and attitudes in the UK. OxIS 2011 is the fifth in a series, with previous surveys conducted in 2003, 2005, 2007, and 2009. Each has used a multi-stage national probability sample of approximately 2000 respondents, enabling researchers to project estimates to the wider UK population. OxIS 2011 sampled 2057 respondents, 1498 (73%) of which were Internet users at the time of completing the survey. Of these 1498, 60 percent used social network sites, up from 49 percent in 2009 and 17 percent in 2007. Although OxIS 2013 data is not yet available, initial estimates suggest that the number of social network site users in the UK has stabilised around the 60 percent mark (Dutton, Blank, & Groselj, 2013). It is this population of social network site users that form the focus of this study.

Measures

General social network site use. General social network site use, the primary independent variable, was measured using responses to the question: *How often do you use the Internet to check or update your profile on a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook?* (QC9i). Respondents were given the following options as answers: *Never, less than monthly, monthly, weekly, daily, and several times a day.* Responses were coded to form a scale from zero to five, with those responding *never* coded as zero, through to five for those who check or update a social network site profile *several times a day.*

Inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites. This variable was measured using responses to the question: *Thinking about all of the social network sites you use, how often do you receive news or information?* (QC36i). Respondents were given the following options as answers: *Never, less than monthly, monthly, weekly, daily, and several times a day.* Responses were coded to form a scale from zero to five, with those responding *never* coded as zero, through to five for those who check or update a social network site profile *several times a day.* Since a variety of questions in the survey asked respondents about their intentional access of news and information, and the question preceding QC36i asked respondents about the frequency with which they actively use social network sites to learn about or follow politics (QC36h), question QC36i was deemed to capture *non-intentional or inadvertent* exposure to news and information on social network sites as opposed to intentional exposure.

Political participation. The dependent variable, political participation, was measured using responses to two questions. The first question asked respondents: *In the last year have you sent an email or message supporting a social or political cause?* (QP6a). Respondents were given the option to answer either yes or no. The second question asked respondents: *In the last year, have you done any of the following? a. Contacted a politician, government or local*

government officer (e.g. your MP or a councillor), b. Joined a political party, c. Joined another civic organisation or association such as those involved in environmental or human rights campaigning, d. Signed a petition, e. Taken part in a lawful demonstration, f. Contacted a political party, g. Deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons, h. Donated money to a political organisation or group, or i. Donated money to a civic organisation or group (QP2). Respondents were given the following options as answers: *Yes – both Offline and Online, Yes – only Online, Yes – only Offline, No.* Each of the nine activities formed individual variables representing the different forms of participation. Each variable was also transformed into a dummy variable, coded 0 for all those who did not participate and 1 for those who did, regardless of whether participation was online, offline, or both. Dummy variables for QP2 *a* and *f* were combined to form a single variable to represent those who had contacted a politician *or* a political party, QP2 *b* and *c* were combined to represent those respondents who had joined a political or civic organisation, while QP2 *h* and *i* were combined to form a single variable for donating. By creating a series of dummy variables, the present study is able to more accurately estimate the relationship between social network site use and political participation than those which combine all participatory acts in a single additive index.

Control variables. OxIS 2011 featured a range of questions relating to various individual-level socio-economic and demographic characteristics which have been shown to predict both political participation and online news exposure. Those included in the analyses that follow were age, educational attainment, income and gender.

Also included in the analyses is the variable political interest. Again, interest in politics has been shown to be a powerful predictor of both political participation and online news exposure. Political interest was measured using responses to the question: *How interested would you say you are in politics?* Respondents were given the following options

as answers: *Not at all interest, not very interested, interested, very interested*. These responses were coded to form a four-point scale, from zero for those answering not at all, through to three for those respondents who were very interested in politics.

Finally, to ensure that the frequency of inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites was not simply reflective of existing patterns of online news use or a by-product of political uses of social network sites, two further control variables were created. These variables measured the frequency with which respondents use the Internet to look for news (QC19: *How frequently do you use the Internet for... looking for news – local, national, international*) or use social network sites to find out about or follow politics (QC36h: *Thinking about all of the social network sites you use, how often do you... follow a politician or political cause*). As with the previous frequency measures, respondents were given the following options as answers for both questions: *Never, less than monthly, monthly, weekly, daily, and several times a day*.

Analyses

A series of regression models are used to test each of the above hypotheses. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression is used to estimate the relationship between general social network site use and inadvertent news and information exposure on social network sites (H_1). It does so whilst controlling for the influence of various other known and hypothetical predictors of news exposure on social network sites.

The relationship between inadvertent news and information exposure on social network sites and political participation (H_2) is estimated through a series of binary logistic regression models. Since each form of participation is represented by a single dummy variable, binary logistic regression allows us to estimate the strength of these relationships whilst controlling for the influence of various other known predictors of political participation.

The final hypothesis is tested using an SPSS macro designed to estimate the parameters of over 70 distinct mediation and moderation models (see Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Landreville, Holbert, & LaMarre, 2010; Lee & Shin, 2012 for studies using earlier versions of this macro). This so-called PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) uses a regression-based approach to estimate indirect effects. The PROCESS macro partitions the effect of X on Y into direct and indirect components. The *direct* effect of X on Y is estimated independent of X's effect on M. The *indirect* effect of X on Y, alternatively, is estimated as the product of a (H_1) and b (H_2) and is interpreted as the amount that Y is expected to change as X changes by one unit as a result of X's effect on M which, in turn, affects Y (see Hayes 2013; Hayes & Preacher, 2010 for a more detailed explanation). Model 4 of the PROCESS macro estimates these parameters for a simple mediation model such as that posited in H_3 .

Findings

Table 2.1 presents the OLS coefficients predicting inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites. The results support H_1 which predicts that general social network site use will be positively related to inadvertent exposure to news and information. A regression coefficient of .244 tells us that for every unit increase in frequency of general social network site use there is a .24 unit increase in the frequency of inadvertent exposure to news and information, even after controlling for a variety of alternative explanations.

Notably, general social network site use predicts inadvertent exposure to news and information even after controlling for the extent to which users search for news the Internet more widely. Furthermore, a standardised regression coefficient of .258 tells us that general social network site use is an important predictor of inadvertent exposure to news and information relative to the other variables included in the analysis. In fact, when it comes to predicting inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites, general

social network site use is second only to the frequency of searching for news on the Internet in terms of its explanatory power. Age, political interest, and education are also significant predictors of exposure to news and information on social network sites, while the results suggest also that women are more likely than men to be exposed to news and information.

Table 2.1. Predicting inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites.

	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Std. <i>B</i>	<i>p.</i>
General SNS	.244	.029	.258	.000
Internet for news	.282	.032	.293	.000
Political interest	.163	.050	.107	.001
Age	-.119	.034	-.130	.000
Education	.154	.058	.085	.008
Income	.053	.031	.051	.093
Gender (female)	-.227	.096	-.077	.018
Constant	.448			.113
Adjusted R ²	.223			
<i>N</i>	918			

Model includes the variable 'weight'

Table 2.2 presents the logistic regression odds ratios estimating the relationship between inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites and various modes of political participation. The results suggest that, contrary to H₂, inadvertent news and information exposure on social network sites does not predict widespread political participation. In fact, inadvertent exposure to news and information on these sites is related only to buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons. An odds ratio of 1.243 (p. 009) represents a significant positive relationship between these two variables, suggesting that an increase in inadvertent exposure to news and information is associated

with boycotting certain products and services. This relationship holds true even after controlling for the influence of other potential predictors of political participation, including political interest and the frequency with which users purposefully access political information on social network sites. Taken together, all the variables in this model explain 28.5 percent of the variance in the dependent variable. The Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test statistic (sig = .550) suggest it is a well-fitting model.

Table 2.2. Predicting political participation.

	Message	Petition	Contact	Boycott	Join	Donate	Protest
Inadvertent Exposure	1.010 (.916)	1.067 (.343)	.980 (.834)	1.243 (.009)	1.089 (.525)	1.057 (.568)	.755 (.116)
SNS for Politics	1.380 (.011)	1.259 (.030)	1.453 (.003)	1.060 (.630)	1.638 (.002)	1.293 (.049)	1.786 (.005)
Political Interest	2.886 (.000)	2.740 (.000)	3.361 (.000)	2.591 (.000)	3.657 (.000)	2.215 (.000)	3.664 (.000)
Age	1.087 (.392)	1.154 (.046)	1.317 (.005)	1.208 (.033)	1.100 (.489)	1.053 (.603)	.731 (.058)
Education	1.497 (.016)	1.776 (.000)	1.387 (.040)	1.618 (.001)	2.079 (.005)	1.441 (.032)	1.276 (.404)
Income	.939 (.531)	.924 (.254)	.856 (.110)	.976 (.788)	.980 (.892)	1.033 (.746)	1.350 (.094)
Gender	1.199 (.504)	1.701 (.009)	.808 (.424)	1.815 (.017)	2.060 (.056)	1.435 (.196)	1.278 (.581)
Constant	-5.935 (.003)	-5.644 (.004)	-6.684 (.001)	-6.191 (.002)	-8.912 (.000)	-5.871 (.003)	-6.603 (.001)
R ²	.280	.334	.349	.285	.372	.186	.287
N	777	774	773	775	776	776	775
H-L (sig.)	.787	.757	.306	.550	.820	.506	.673

Cell entries are odds ratios. *p.* values in parentheses. R² = Nagelkerke pseudo R².

H-L (sig.) = Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness of fit test statistic *p.* value.

All models include the variable 'weight'.

All other forms of political participation included in the analysis are, however, unrelated to inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites, even those activities which require minimal effort. According to Table 2.2 the strongest predictor of political participation is political interest. Perhaps unsurprisingly, political interest significantly predicts all modes of political participation. In terms of explanatory power, political interest is followed by political uses of social network sites. Using social network sites to find political information significantly predicts participation in six of the seven political activities, with the exception of buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons. Similarly, level of education significantly predicts participation in six of the seven political activities included in the analysis, this time with the exception of joining a demonstration. Only the variable income fails to significantly predict any mode of political participation.

Table 2.3 presents the bootstrap confidence intervals generated using the PROCESS macro to test H_3 . The confidence intervals are used to estimate the statistical significance of the indirect effect of general social network site use on various modes of political participation *via* inadvertent exposure to news and information. Confidence intervals not containing zero are those which are statistically significant, suggesting that the relationship between general social network site use and political participation is, in part, a by-product of inadvertent exposure to news and information.

Given the results presented in Table 2.2, it is hardly surprising that the indirect effect of inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites is not statistically significant when it comes to predicting the relationship between general social network site use and most forms of political participation. In fact, even instances in which direct relationships were discovered between general social network site use and political participation (see Table 2.3), these were in no way attributable to inadvertent exposure to news and information. Only when it came to buying certain products (LLCI = .0139, ULCI =

.0978) was the indirect effect of inadvertent exposure to news and information statistically significant. Contrary to H₃, therefore, it seems that general social network site use does not exert influence over political participation by inadvertently exposing users to news and information with the exception of buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons.

Table 2.3. Indirect effects of general social network site use on political participation via inadvertent exposure to news and information.

	Effect	LLCI	ULCI	R ²	N
Message	.0134 (.0256)	-.0371	.0649	.284	777
Petition	.0128 (.0190)	-.0257	.0501	.348	775
Contact*	.0298 (.0252)	-.0167	.0848	.352	774
Boycott	.0545 (.0215)	.0139	.0978	.304	775
Join	.0402 (.0369)	-.0263	.1181	.327	777
Donate*	.0383 (.0268)	-.0133	.0949	.254	776
Demonstrate	-.100 (.0442)	-.1008	.0764	.292	776

5000 bootstrap samples. S.E in parentheses. R² = Nagelkerke R².

Bootstrap confidence intervals generated using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro.

Model 4 of the PROCESS macro includes the covariates ‘Internet for News’, ‘Political Interest’, ‘Age’, ‘Education’, ‘Income’, ‘Gender’ and ‘weight’.

Dependent variables marked with an asterisk are directly related to general social network site use

Discussion

Recent research suggests that informational uses of social network sites is positively related to political participation. In short, this growing body of research finds that those who use

social network sites to access news and information are more likely to participate in the political process than those who use these sites for other purposes.

The present study argues, however, that this motivational approach to news use fails to account for the fundamental nature of information consumption on social network sites. Indeed, few people use social network sites to actively seek news and information. Instead, they encounter such content inadvertently, when using these sites for other purposes. The present study therefore sets out to investigate the role of inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites and its potential influence on political participation.

The study began by testing the assumption that everyday social network site use predicts inadvertent exposure to news and information, even amongst those who do not typically encounter such content. As hypothesised, general social network site use was found to be positively related to inadvertent exposure to news and information on these sites, even after controlling for the frequency with which the respondent actively seeks news and information online. This finding supports recent survey data which shows large numbers of social network site users are becoming exposed to news and information when using these sites for other purposes. It also offers a challenge to those who argue that the homophily principle in social networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001) has the potential to restrict social network site users to a 'daily me' (Sunstein, 2001) of personalised media content in which they become exposed only to content that they personally consider enjoyable or useful. In contrast, the findings of the analysis suggest that social network site users regularly exposed to a wide range of content that they might otherwise never encounter online.

Given what we know about the relationship between news media use and political participation, it was hypothesised that even inadvertent exposure to news and information would increase the likelihood that users would participate in political activities. However,

contrary to expectations, inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites did not translate into widespread political participation. In fact, after controlling for a range of other determinants, including using social network sites to actively seek political content, *inadvertent* exposure to news and information was related to just a single form of political participation; buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons. All other forms of political participation were un-related. Yet, *actively* exposing oneself to political news and information was found to be a significant predictor of all forms of political participation with the exception of buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons.

It seems, therefore, that when it comes to news and information on social network sites, understanding users' motives is not the only way to predict exposure. However, when it comes to estimating the effects of exposure to news and information on political participation, the motivational approach to media use remains the most useful and influential.

This finding is confirmed using an SPSS macro designed to estimate indirect effects (Hayes, 2013). This PROCESS macro is able to estimate both the direct relationship between everyday social network site use and political participation, as well as the indirect relationship between everyday social network site use and political participation *via* inadvertent exposure to news and information. Again, with the exception of buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons, everyday social network site use was found to exert no influence on political participation *via* inadvertent exposure to news and information.

Interestingly, everyday social network site use was *directly* related to contacting a politician, government or local government officer and to donating money to a civic or political organisation or group. However, these relationships did not occur because everyday

social network site use leads to inadvertent exposure to news and information. Rather, another causal explanation exists linking these two variables.

There are a number of limitations which are important to note here. The first relates to the use of self-reported measures of inadvertent media exposure. Indeed, self-reported media exposure used in survey research is particularly problematic. Measures of self-reported media exposure used in survey research are notoriously unreliable (Hovland, 1959), largely due to the inability of people to recall their political exposure and experiences (Bradburn, Rips, & Shevell, 1987; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). In their study of the effects of political advertisements, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), for example, found that half of all participants in their experiment were unable, just thirty minutes after taking part, to recall having seen their particular advertisement. Researchers who rely on such measures are likely to misinterpret the impact of news coverage on political behaviour (Price & Zaller, 1993, p. 134). This is especially true in the case of *inadvertent* exposure.

Although this is a potential problem, there remain few alternatives for researchers. Inadvertent exposure to news and information posted by members of an existing network is extremely difficult to replicate in an experimental setting. Researchers are unable to manipulate who is inadvertently exposed to certain content within an online social network without themselves being part of that network. Thus, self-reported media exposure is arguably the best, and only available option for investigating inadvertent exposure.

A second potential limitation relates to the use of cross-sectional data and, in particular, the inclusion of political interest as a control variable. The cross-sectional nature of the OxIS data prevents us from making any claims regarding the existence of causality between inadvertent exposure to news and information and buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons. Although it is hard to see how buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons may lead to greater inadvertent

exposure to news and information, the use of cross-sectional data prevents us from ruling out spuriousness in explaining this finding.

A third limitation relates to the use of traditional forms of political engagement to indicate participation. Social network sites have provided users with a plethora of new tools through which they can engage in politics. Facebook users can signal their support for a political candidate or issue, for example, simply by clicking the “like” button. Twitter users, on the other hand, can do so by “retweeting” other people’s messages of support. Both forms of participation are equivalent to expressing support for a political candidate or issue, although they would not necessarily be reported as such in the survey data used here. Similarly, Google+ users may “hang-out” with a political candidate or elected official, thereby establishing contact with them. Again, this form of contact is not recognised by OxIS 2011 as a form of political participation. Although it remains hotly contested as to whether these forms of participation are in fact meaningful, if they are supplanting engagement in more traditional forms of political action it does highlight a clear need to reconceptualise what we think of as political participation.

Given the causal process under investigation, it is also important to note that political interest cannot be assumed to be exogenous (see Boulianne, 2011). However, since the motivational approach to the relationship between media use and political participation assumes individuals consuming news and information are pre-disposed to participate in politics, it is essential to control for the influence of political interest to isolate the potential influence of inadvertent exposure to news and information on participation. In an attempt to allay concerns relating to this endogeneity problem, political interest was omitted from all analyses. Yet, the omission of this important control variable did not significantly alter the results. However, to overcome this problem altogether, longitudinal data would be required.

Despite these limitations, the present paper offers a unique insight into the democratic implications of inadvertent exposure to news and information on social network sites. It suggests that social network sites have become an important source of news and information for many users, even those with little interest in politics or current affairs. However, any expectations that this will go some way to addressing a perceived lack of engagement in the political process amongst the masses seem to be wildly optimistic.

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Paper 3: **Deliberation 2.0: Comparing the Deliberative Quality of Online News User Comments across Platforms**².

Abstract

As news organisations look toward social networking sites as a way to expand their audience, the present paper explores how this trend might impact discussion amongst users of political news content. A content analysis of user comments left by readers of the Washington Post suggests that when it comes to discussing political news, there are significant differences in the deliberative quality of those who access the news directly through the news organisations website and those who access the same news via Facebook. In short, comments left by website users exhibited greater deliberative quality than those left by Facebook users.

² An identical version of this manuscript was accepted for publication in the Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media on March 25 2015. The manuscript is slated for release in late 2015.

Introduction

Democratic theory has taken a decidedly deliberative turn in recent decades (Dryzek, 2000). In fact, it is often suggested that the deliberative variant has become *the* dominant approach in democratic theory. Rather than viewing democracy as a process in which fixed preferences and interests compete via fair elections and other mechanisms of aggregation, ‘deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will formation that precede voting’ (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). Citizens who engage in such communicative processes are thought to be more engaged and active in civic affairs (Barber, 1984), more tolerant of opposing points of view (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), better able to understand and justify their own political and social preferences (Chambers, 1996), and more trusting of the democratic process (Fishkin, 1995). Moreover, decisions made will be more considered and informed by relevant reasons and evidence and will therefore benefit both individual and collective decision-making (Gastil, 2000).

News organizations have traditionally played an important role in the deliberative system, not only because they provide citizens with the informational resources needed to deliberate, but because through forums such as letters to the editor they also facilitate communication amongst citizens. Recent developments in the Internet and its associated technologies have consolidated the role of news organizations in the deliberative system. User generated content (UGC) features such as the comment sections attached to news content provide unprecedented opportunities for large numbers of readers to participate in discussion with others about the social and political issues of greatest concern to them. By providing users with a public space in which they can contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise, as well as interact with others, news organizations are opening up opportunities for public deliberation. Indeed, it has even been said that digital news media

facilitates citizen debate that is ‘far more open, accessible, and efficient than the mechanisms of participation in legacy media’ (Ruiz et al., 2011).

The present study seeks to explore the extent to which political discussion in these sections is shaped by the platform through which user’s access online news content. Since news organisations are energetically pushing their content on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in an effort to promote their content to as wide an audience as possible, it is becoming increasingly important to understand how discussion in comment sections differs across platforms. The present study therefore compares the content of comments left by users who access content directly through the news organisations website with those who access the same content on Facebook. Specifically, it considers and tests how comments left by users of the Washington Post website and the Washington Post Facebook page differ in terms of their deliberative quality. Facebook was chosen as a comparative case, not only because a third of all adults in the United States are now thought to encounter news on the social network site (Pew Research Center, 2013a), but because the many affordances of this platform have been shown to influence the way users communicate with one another.

Digital news media and deliberation

According to recent research, the vast majority of Americans now get news in some digital format (Pew Research Center, 2014). This trend toward digitalisation has facilitated the development of various UGC features. Perhaps the most widely used and commonly studied of these features is the reader comment section of online news content (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). As implemented by most online news organisations, this feature is relatively straightforward. It provides users with a public space in which they are invited to contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise to the content produced by professional journalists (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). This feature has become ubiquitous among online

news organisations, particularly online newspapers. In fact, by 2010, 92 percent of the top 150 U.S. newspapers allowed their online readers to leave comments (Santana, 2011).

The democratic potential of user comments and other UGC features is largely approached from a citizen journalist perspective (see Chung, 2007). Indeed, the development of such features has ‘the potential to trigger a paradigm shift in mass media by challenging the traditional unidirectional flow of messages,’ thus empowering citizens to take greater control over news content (Chung, 2007, p. 43).

However, user comments may serve democratic norms in another, arguably more direct way. By offering readers access to news content, and providing them with a public space in which they can contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise, as well as interact with others, online newspapers are opening up opportunities for public deliberation to emerge (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; see also McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008). Although user comments do not necessarily meet all of the criteria implicit in the ordinary use of the term deliberation, such “everyday talk” and “open-ended dialogue” amongst citizens is a crucial part of the full deliberative system (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Mansbridge, 1999).

While many media commentators remain sceptical about the deliberative potential of these sections given the relatively high-level of anonymity that they afford users (Boczkowski, 1999; Pitts, 2010; Foxman & Wolf, 2013; Santana, 2014), research suggests that they do in fact often facilitate highly deliberative political discussions. For example, in their content analysis of the comment sections from the *Des Moines Register* and the *Scripps Treasure Coast*, Manosevitch and Walker (2009, p. 21) found that user comments offered a ‘substantial amount of factual information, and demonstrated a public process of weighing alternatives via the expression of issue positions and supporting rationales.’ Moreover, this was ‘communicated through a social aspect, with readers addressing each other and the

newspaper content, raising questions, and sharing additional sources of information’ (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009, p. 21). Drawing on Gastil’s (2008) definition of public deliberation, user comments thus ‘demonstrated both an analytic process of deliberation as well as a social process of deliberation’ (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009, p. 18). In a similar, but considerably larger study of national newspapers across five countries, Ruiz et al. (2011) also found evidence of deliberation amongst readers. In the case of the NY Times, the authors found that ‘[d]ebates are on topic and well argued.’ Furthermore, a relevant number of users contributed their personal or professional experience to support their opinions, while many others contributed additional sources of information and data to strengthen their arguments. These findings have been corroborated in studies of other online newspapers, both in the US (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012) and abroad (Canter, 2013; Zhou et al., 2008).

Digital news media and deliberation on Facebook

In an effort to promote their content, news organisations have begun to experiment using multiple online channels. Given their phenomenal popularity, many news organisations have begun energetically pushing their content in social online spaces such as Facebook and Twitter (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). In doing so they are able to promote their content by sharing hyperlinks to stories on their own website, or, in the case of Facebook, hosting their own Facebook page on which they can post much of the same content and many of the same features that appear on their website.

When it comes to accessing news content on social network sites, Facebook is by far the most popular platform. Indeed, recent research found that 47 percent of adult Facebook users in the United States reported “ever” getting news on the social network site. This figure equates to approximately 30 percent of the country’s entire adult population (Pew Research Center, 2013a). This is in stark contrast to other popular social network sites such as Twitter

and LinkedIn, for example, which exposed eight percent and three percent of the adult population to news, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2013b).

Just as direct news users, that is, those who access news content directly through the organizations website, are provided with space to engage in discussion in the comment sections of online news content, Facebook news users are afforded a similar opportunity to engage in public deliberation on the social network site. When encountering content on Facebook, regardless of whether or not it is *news* content, users are given the opportunity to comment on it in much the same way as they would in user comment sections. Thus, Facebook news users are offered the same opportunities for public deliberation as direct news users. Given that news organisations often post the same content, in the same format, on both their website and Facebook page, this provides an ideal opportunity to compare the quality of deliberation as it occurs amongst direct news users and Facebook news users.

This comparison is particularly interesting in light of recent research which suggests that the way user's access news is an important predictor of their engagement (Pew Research Center, 2014). Indeed, direct news users, when compared to Facebook news users, were shown to spend more time with news content, view more stories, and access news more often (Pew Research Center, 2014). The present study seeks to find out if direct news users and Facebook news users differ when it comes to another important indicator of engagement: discussion about the content they consume.

What makes Facebook different?

In order to understand how Facebook shapes political discussion, it is useful to think about the platform as a *networked public*. Networked publics are 'publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through

networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice (Boyd, 2011, p. 39).

Networked technologies such as Facebook ‘introduce new affordances for amplifying, recording, and spreading information and social acts’ (Boyd, 2011, p. 45) creating what Baym and Boyd (2012) call ‘socially mediated publicness.’ Features such as the news feed function, for example, spread information across networks, meaning that any activity a user performs via their Facebook account may potentially be seen by all members of their network. Similarly, Facebook “friends” have access to one another’s profiles, meaning even those who do not receive information via the news feed can go directly to individual profiles to see what activities that user has participated in. Such features and functions introduce new dynamics with which users must contend. Boyd (2011, p. 49) identifies three dynamics in particular ‘that play a central role in shaping networked publics,’ and potentially communicative behaviour in this context: invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private.

An invisible audience, or imagined audience, is ‘the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating, our audience’ (Litt, 2012, p. 331). As the affordances of social network sites have altered ‘the size, composition, boundaries, accessibility, and cue availability of our communication partners during everyday interactions’ (Litt, 2012, p. 332), it has become almost impossible to determine the actual audience. Since individuals behave and communicate in ways that largely conform to their audience’s values (Leary, 1995), ‘knowing one’s audience matters when trying to determine what is socially appropriate to say’ (Boyd, 2011, p. 50).

The notion of an invisible audience is closely related to Boyd’s (2011) second dynamic, collapsed contexts. Context collapse refers to the ‘flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a

singular group' (Vitak, 2012, p. 451). Online social networks commonly comprise individuals from various social spheres, including immediate and extended family, people from high school and college, as well as co-workers, bosses, neighbors, and acquaintances (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). While context collapse may benefit the deliberative process by allowing users to quickly divulge information across their entire network and facilitate interaction across large and diverse groups of individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to communicate, it does make it considerably more difficult for users to segment audiences and present varied versions of the self (Vitak, 2012). Thus, even when one's audience is *not* invisible, 'it can be challenging to contend with groups of people who reflect different social contexts and have different expectations as to what's appropriate' (Boyd, 2011, p. 50).

Both invisible audiences and collapsed contexts are related to the third dynamic of interest, the blurring of boundaries between public and private. It has become evident that social networking sites are neither prototypically 'private' nor obviously 'public.' Consequently, '[w]e do not know quite how to think about these technologies and social spaces, we do not know quite how to behave within them, and, critically, we do not understand the social norms regarding disclosure and sharing in these spaces' (Burkell, Fortier, Wong, & Simpson, 2014, p. 2)

A number of studies have begun to investigate the extent to which political discussion on Facebook is shaped by this so-called 'socially mediated publicness' (Burkell et al., 2014; Semaan, Robertson, Douglas, & Maruyama, 2014). In short, this research supports the notion that the socially mediated publicness of Facebook influences the way users engage in political discussion on the social network site.

In a series of interviews with a small number of US citizens, Semaan et al. (2014) highlight the salience of invisible audiences and collapsed contexts amongst Facebook users.

When questioned about how participants use various online platforms to discuss politics, one interviewee in their study expressed this telling sentiment:

“[w]ith Facebook there’s a stamp of personal convention on what you post. I’m extremely liberal and if I would post something from the conservative slant because I felt people should be aware of that side... I would receive a TON of negative feedback... I was going against their expectations of me... so I stopped posting things like that there.” (Semaan et al., 2014, p. 8).

Another interviewee expressed similar concerns about their political behaviour on Facebook and how the publicness of the platform influences their actions:

“Facebook to me is way more personal. I can’t go and ‘Like’ a candidate’s site on Facebook that I don’t align with politically. I have a pretty large network on Facebook... I don’t want them to see that I’m following the ‘other’ side... it really restricts me because I can’t follow those other views so easily [and receive their updates]...” (Seeman et al., 2014, p. 6).

Interestingly, Semaan et al. (2014, p. 1) also found that interviewees who did wish to disclose political preferences and/or engage in political discussion online often ‘adopted, or switched to, alternative media that could afford what they were trying to achieve.’ This would suggest that differences in the quality of deliberation across platforms is not simply reflective of differences between audiences, but may be shaped to some degree by the platform being used.

While a comparable study by Burkell et al. (2014) came to similar conclusions with regards to growing anxieties amongst Facebook users of invisible audiences and collapsed contexts, they also highlight the blurring of boundaries between public and private on the social network site. For example, a small number of participants indicated that they share their Facebook passwords with others, thereby providing access to all the profiles in their

‘friends’ list to someone who might not otherwise be able to see these profiles. Others expressed concerns that the conversations they had, or content they posted, on Facebook would be shared with people beyond their own network, even those who do not use Facebook. When talking about people posting information on Facebook, one interviewee claimed ‘they should expect that people will talk about it...if you have three hundred friends...the chances of them passing some information on to someone about you, even in casual conversation – are probably pretty high’ (Burkell et al., 2014, p. 8).

While it seems clear from this qualitative research that the socially mediated publicness of Facebook may prevent users from disclosing sensitive or potentially controversial information, thereby prohibiting deliberation from occurring, little is known about how other aspects of deliberation may be affected. Although previous research suggests that the aforementioned affordances of Facebook may lead to more *civil* political discussion in these sections (Santana, 2014), this does not necessarily translate into more *deliberative* political discussion. Indeed, participants may remain civil without actually engaging in deliberation. Thus, the present study aims to address this gap in our knowledge and explore how Facebook may influence various indicators of deliberation.

Methodology

To begin exploring differences in the deliberative quality of direct news user comments and Facebook news user comments, a sample of comments was taken from The Washington Post (WAPO). The Washington Post was selected as the sole source of user comments for a number of reasons. Firstly, it remains one of the most popular online US daily newspapers in the country. According to Alexa.com (2014), the digital media analytics company, the Washington Post is the fourth most-read online US newspaper, behind the New York Times, USA Today, and the Wall Street Journal. At the time of research, however, the Washington

Post, unlike the three larger online newspapers, neither placed limits on the number of articles non-subscribers can access (NY Times), nor required users to comment on the website via their Facebook account (USA Today). Moreover, the Washington Post uploaded considerably more content to its Facebook page than both the USA Today and the Wall Street Journal, making it the most suitable daily newspaper for comparison. Secondly, the user comments section on the Washington Post website is similarly structured to the Facebook comment function. By comparing WAPO website comments to WAPO Facebook comments we are therefore able to ensure that any variation in deliberative quality does not result from differences in the communicative structure of the comments section (Janssen & Kies, 2005). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Washington Post was selected as the *sole* source of comments in an effort to control for differences in the ideological bias, journalistic style, and moderation policies that exist *across* news organisations. By analysing discussion relating to a single source of political news content we can be more confident therefore that any difference in the deliberative quality of the comments may be a result of the platform type, as opposed to the source or style of the news content.

Sample

Comments were selected for analysis using a two-stage sampling strategy. The first stage involved generating a stratified sample of political news articles over 2-constructed weeks in the first half of 2013. Constructed week sampling was used as it remains arguably the most efficient way to compensate for the cyclical nature of daily news reporting (Riffe et al., 2005). Only two eligibility criteria were established for generating a selection of articles during the first stage of sampling. Firstly, only comments left in response to articles on the Washington Post “Politics” section, the “Post Politics” blog, “The Fix” blog, or the political science perspective section of the Post’s “Wonkblog” were eligible. In order for the article to be included in the sample it had to report on an issue or policy, rather than simply a political

topic. For example, articles during this period reported on the White House correspondent's dinner and a eulogy delivered by Vice President Joe Biden. These were excluded because they did not provide readers with a specific problem or issue to discuss. Secondly, the article had to appear on both the WAPO website *and* Facebook page simultaneously, allowing us to compare comments from the same articles, therefore removing the possibility that a particularly divisive issue or negatively framed article could skew the results. In total, 21 articles were included for the second stage of the sampling process. The articles reported on a variety of issues, including common-core education policy, gun control, immigration, medicare, same-sex marriage, and voter registration laws. Others reported on issues associated with prominent individuals such as Edward Snowden, Senator Robert Mendez, and Congressman Trent Franks to name a few.

The second stage involved generating a random sample of publicly available reader comments from the 21 articles generated in stage one. In total, 4291 comments were collected on the Washington Post's website, and 2130 comments on the Washington Post's Facebook page. For articles that received over 250 comments on either the Website or the Facebook page, a random selection of 250 comments were entered into the sample pool. All website comments were entered into a database, as were the Facebook comments, where they were numbered chronologically and had all identifying information removed. Each comment was also given a number to signify from which article it was taken to aid in the analysis. A random sample of 1000 comments was then drawn, with 500 website comments and 500 Facebook comments selected independently. Any 'spam' (2) or non-English comments (5) were removed from the sample and were replaced by the following comment.

Coding scheme:

A number of coding schemes have been developed in recent years in an effort to measure the quality, or identify the occurrence, of deliberation in a number of different contexts (see, for example, Burkhalter et al., 2002; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2003; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Given the exploratory nature of the present study, a number of different categories will be drawn on from across this literature in an effort to provide a wide-ranging and inclusive analysis. All comments contained in the sample were coded on the following categories:

Topic: Comments were first coded in an effort to determine whether or not they were relevant. Relevant comments were those which addressed the topic at hand. Clearly, topic is an important element of deliberation; ‘If the discussion is off topic, then the deliberation cannot meet its objective of deep consideration of an issue (Stromer-Galley, 2007, p. 6). In their analysis of synchronous online discussion of various topics, Stromer-Galley and Martinson (2009) identify and distinguish between two conceptualisations of topic – structuring topic and interactional topic. Structuring topic refers to the topic established prior to or outside of the immediate discussion. In the present study, the structuring topic is that which is reported on in the article to which the comment is posted. The second conceptualisation refers to the topics of discussion which emerge through the process of interaction. For example, many commenters discussing the issue of immigration often invoke economic arguments to support their claims. Thus, comments addressing economic issues in this context would also be considered relevant and on topic.

While participants who drift quickly from one topic to another in deliberation, even interactional topics relevant to the discussion, may not fully consider the issue or problem at hand, both structuring topic and interactional topic likely matter to the quality of deliberation that occurs (Stromer-Galley, 2007). Thus, comments referring either to the structuring or

interactional topics are coded as ‘On Topic’, while those that appear to be irrelevant are coded as ‘Off Topic’.

Opinion: In order to deliberate, participants must first be willing to express their position on a given issue or policy. As we have seen, the publicness associated with Facebook may discourage users from openly expressing their views and opinions, thereby reducing the quality of deliberation that might occur. Comments were therefore coded as expressing an opinion on, or position towards, the policy, issue, or individual being reported on in the article to which the comment referred. All comments which expressed a position for or against were coded as ‘Opinion’, while those that were deemed not to have contained an expression of opinion, or whose opinion was unclear, were coded ‘No Opinion’.

Opinion direction: Expressions of opinion were coded for their ideological direction: liberal or conservative. This is not to say that the commenters themselves are liberal or conservative, but rather that their opinion on a particular issue or policy is deemed so by the coder.

Determining whether or not the positions expressed by commenters were liberal or conservative allows us to assess the extent to which there is diversity in opinions amongst users of these forums. If deliberation is dominated by participants who share the same positions, the discussion becomes an echo chamber (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008) where only the same views, positions, and arguments can be heard. A discussion is more deliberative ‘if it takes into account a broad range of perspectives on an issue’ (Burkhalter et al., 2002, p. 402).

Justification: Not only is it necessary for deliberation that participants express their position on a given subject, but for quality deliberation to occur it is also necessary for participants to justify that position. Indeed, Habermas’s public sphere ([1962]1991: 26) was characterised by

the ‘people’s public use of their reason.’ Once participants have asserted their opinions on a given topic, the exchange of supporting reasons allows others to judge the ‘authority of the better argument’ (Habermas, [1962]1991: 36).

Although previous research identifies various degrees of justification and levels of reasoning (Steenbergen et al., 2003; Trenel, 2004), the present study could not achieve inter-coder reliability using this coding scheme. Thus, comments that express an opinion are simply coded dichotomously, with those containing explicit justifications coded ‘1’, and those which are simply asserted without justification coded ‘0’.

Sources: The use of additional sources in deliberation is closely related to the justification of opinions and positions. Indeed, as Stromer-Galley (2007, p. 4) points out, ‘in a deliberative context, a reasoned argument would be one in which assertions are grounded in empirically verifiable evidence.’ By using and referencing additional sources of information, participants provide others with the opportunity to verify the authority, quality, and validity of their justification, particularly when disagreements occur. Moreover, additional sources of information help others become more knowledgeable and familiar with the topic being discussed.

While Stromer-Galley (2007) goes so far as to distinguish between various types of sources that participants might use, the present study simply codes comments for their reference to verifiable sources, including the article being commented upon, policy documents and websites to name a few. All comments which reference a source are coded ‘1’, while those that do not are coded ‘0’.

Narrative: Not only might participants use verifiable sources of information to justify their position, they might also invoke personal experiences. According to Burkhalter et al. (2002, p. 402), personal experience represents ‘a valid form of information on which to base deliberative claims.’ Ryfe (2006) argues that participants tell stories about themselves, their

family, and their friends in order to overcome barriers to deliberation, such as a lack of knowledge about the complex issues which are often the focus of deliberation. Personal narratives (anecdotes) are also thought to be used to validate arguments and opinions and persuade others of their merit. The present study therefore codes comments according to whether or not they include personal narratives. Those that do are coded '1', while those that do not are coded '0'.

Alternative: Although the particular deliberative setting being analysed here does not require it, deliberation in its most formal sense is aimed at participants reaching a rationally motivated consensus. Given that deliberation ought to help identify solutions that meet the needs of participants to a greater degree than the current set of alternatives (Burkhalter et al., 2002) participants who attempt to provide a solution to the problem at hand by offering an alternative way of dealing with it inevitably improve the quality of deliberation. The present analysis therefore codes comments according to whether or not they offer alternative solutions or alternative ways to approach the topic at hand. Those that do are coded '1', while those that do not are coded '0'.

Question: Question asking was also considered an indicator of deliberative quality. Although question asking has not been included in much of the conceptual literature on this topic (for an exception see Stromer-Galley, 2007), it has become prevalent in much of the empirical research, particularly among those investigating the content of user comments (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Ruiz et al., 2011). Questioning suggests that participants are "listening" to others, considering what is being discussed, and attempting to better comprehend it. By taking into account the views and opinions of others, participants may potentially improve the quality of their own arguments and opinions.

Questioning has also been used to signal engagement. Indeed, 'questioning indicates engagement either with the topic or with fellow participants' (Stromer-Galley, 2007), making

it an important indicator of deliberation. Thus, any comments deemed to be posing questions, either to other participants or more generally, are coded '1', while all others are coded '0'.

Interactive: The final category in the analysis refers to the interaction that occurs between participants. In order for deliberation to occur, participants must be willing to listen to one another, take in to account the views and opinions of other participants, and respond accordingly. If commenters fail to take in to account the views, opinions, and arguments of other participants, the discussion can hardly be labelled deliberative. One way to identify whether or not participants actively engage with one another in this way is to determine the extent to which they interact. Comments which refer to other participants or to the claims made by them, either explicitly or implicitly, are considered interactive and coded as '1.' Comments that stand alone in the debate and appear to make no reference to the ongoing discussion would appear to contribute less to the deliberative process and are therefore coded '0'.

Inter-coder reliability

Although the sample was analysed by a single coder, a second coder was recruited to ensure reliability during the coding process. Following a period of training and consultation, both coders analysed a sub-sample of 100 comments. The reliability coefficients are presented in Table 3.1. Given the lack of consensus regarding which reliability indices are most appropriate for which types of analysis, and what magnitude represents a satisfactory level of reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Campanella Bracken, 2002), the results of two reliability tests for each category of deliberation are provided.

Table 3.1.: Inter-coder reliability: Cohen’s Kappa and percent-agreement

Category	<i>k</i>	%
Topic	.82	98
Opinion	.90	96
Liberal/Conservative	.82	90
Justification	.76	90
Alternative	.80	99
Narrative	.88	99
Source	.88	99
Question	1	100
Interactive	.92	96

N = 100

Findings:

Table 3.2 presents the findings of the content analysis. Both the frequency with which each category was identified within the sample, and the extent to which these frequencies differed significantly across the two platforms, are presented in the table.

In line with previous research (Ruiz et al., 2011), an overwhelming majority of comments were deemed relevant and referred to the topic being reported on or being discussed by other participants. In fact, 96.5 percent of *all* comments were deemed relevant and on-topic. A chi-square test of significance finds, however, that although both platforms exhibited a high number of relevant comments, the difference between them was statistically significant at 99 percent confidence ($\chi^2 = 10.688$, $df = 1$), with website comments being more likely to remain on topic than Facebook comments.

A similar relationship between platforms was identified on a number of other indicators included in the analysis. Website comments, for example, were significantly more likely than Facebook comments to contain alternative solutions to the problems being discussed ($\chi^2 = 9.114$, df. 1), to reference external and additional sources of information and data ($\chi^2 = 6.668$, df. 1), and to contain questions, suggesting participants were more engaged with the topic and other participants ($\chi^2 = 7.156$, df. 1).

A more substantive difference between the two platforms was identified when it came to interactivity. While 57 percent of website comments were deemed to be interactive, meaning that they addressed previous contributions and participants in the discussion, just 32.1 percent of Facebook comments were coded as interactive. A chi-square coefficient of 59.380 (df. 1) suggests that we may be 99.9 percent confident that the difference between platforms, when it comes to interaction amongst participants, exists beyond our sample.

There was no statistically significant difference between the two platforms when it came to the use of argumentation and justification of political viewpoints and issue positions, and there was no difference in participants' use of narratives and personal experience either.

Only when it came to expressing an opinion or position on the issue being reported on does Facebook appear more beneficial to the deliberative process. Indeed, 64.7 percent of the relevant comments on Facebook disclosed an opinion or position on a given issue, compared to 56.3 percent of website comments. A chi-square coefficient of 7.103 (df. 1) confirms that this difference is statistically significant at 99 percent confidence. Interestingly, this finding contradicts what we might expect given the previous research suggests that Facebook users might be more reluctant to express their opinion or position on a specific political issue or topic given the socially mediated publicness of the social network site.

Table 3.2. Elements of deliberation by platform type.

	Facebook	Website	χ^2	<i>N</i>
Topic	473 (94.6)	492 (98.4)	10.688 (<i>p</i> < .01)	1000
Opinion	306 (64.7)	277 (56.3)	7.103 (<i>p</i> < .01)	965
Liberal Opinion	205 (67)	155 (56)	7.781 (<i>p</i> < .01)	583
Justification	106 (34.6)	111 (41)	2.155 (<i>p</i> > .05)	583
Alternative	11 (2.3)	31 (6.3)	9.114 (<i>p</i> < .01)	965
Narrative	21 (4.4)	18 (3.7)	.388 (<i>p</i> > .05)	965
Source	16 (3.4)	35 (7.1)	6.668 (<i>p</i> < .01)	965
Question	21 (4.4)	43 (8.7)	7.156 (<i>p</i> < .01)	965
Interactive	152 (32.1)	280 (57)	59.380 (<i>p</i> < .001)	965

N.B. Only comments coded positively for 'Topic' were analysed for other elements of deliberation.

Only comments coded positively for 'Opinion' were coded for 'Liberal Opinion' and 'Justification'.

Frequency percentages for each platform in parentheses.

The increased propensity to express an opinion on Facebook, however, may be explained somewhat by the fact that the majority of opinions expressed by commenters on the Facebook page (67%) were deemed to be ideologically congruent with the Washington Post's relatively liberal stance. Given that over two-thirds of Facebook comments expressed liberal sentiments, representing a clearly dominant discourse on the WAPO Facebook page, it is perhaps unsurprising that users would be more likely to express them *despite* the publicness of the platform. In contrast, political views expressed on the website were significantly more ideologically balanced, with 56% of opinions coded as liberal-leaning, and 44% as conservative-leaning. Unlike the Facebook page, therefore, the dominant ideological position

of participants would be considerably less obvious for many commenters on the Washington Post website, possibly prohibiting them from expressing an opinion. This finding suggests that the discussion taking place on the website is significantly more balanced in terms of the ideological position of users than that which occurs on the Facebook page. Such balanced discussion is a desirable deliberative quality since it prevents one group from dominating proceedings.

Discussion

Given the phenomenal popularity of online social network sites in recent years, news organisations have begun to establish a presence on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Recent research suggests that this has been a successful strategy. Indeed, it is now estimated that a third of the entire adult population in the United States now encounters news in some form via their Facebook profile (Pew 2013a).

The present study investigates the extent to which direct news users and Facebook news users differ in the way they discuss news content online. Specifically, it analyses the deliberative quality of user comments as they relate to political news content, comparing for differences between those left on the Washington Post website and those left on the Washington Post Facebook page.

The analysis suggests that when it comes to discussing political news content, website commenters are more likely to engage in higher quality discussion than Facebook commenters. In fact, across six of the seven indicators of deliberation where statistically significant differences between the platforms were identified, website comments were considered to be of superior deliberative quality. Website comments were significantly more likely to; (a) be relevant to the topic being addressed in the article or discussed in the thread to which the comment belongs, (b) be more ideologically balanced, (c) offer alternatives to

the policies being reported on or solutions to the problems being discussed, (d) reference, or include, additional and/or external sources of information and/or data, (e) pose questions to other commenters in an effort to withdraw additional information or gain greater clarity, and (f) refer to, or address, other comments and/or participants. It must be acknowledged, however, that although the differences between platforms was statistically significant, it is in many instances substantively small. From a user's perspective, therefore, the differences between platforms may not be particularly obvious and, as a result, may not negatively affect the users' deliberative experience.

Although Facebook users are more likely to express an opinion on the issues being discussed, contradictory to our expectations, these opinions are largely homogeneous compared to those expressed on the website which featured a more balanced distribution of ideological positions. Using an individual-level approach to the analysis of this data, future research will aim to uncover relationships between the various aspects of deliberation, rather than simply comparing platforms using aggregated data. This may shed some light on the relationship between expressing an opinion and the likelihood that the opinion expressed is consistent with the majority.

It is perfectly plausible that the differences in deliberative quality of comments across platforms are simply reflective of differences in audience characteristics. After all, research has shown that direct news users tend to exhibit greater levels of engagement with content than Facebook news users (Pew Research Center, 2014). Presumably, therefore, website commenters would be predisposed to better quality political discussion than Facebook commenters. If true, the findings presented above are neither surprising nor worrisome. Indeed, the least informed and engaged would not be expected to deliberate in the same way as those who are most interested in doing so. Similarly, it is also possible that the differences identified could be explained by the moderation practices of the Washington Post. Since

moderators may remove comments without trace which do not adhere to the organisation's discussion policy, it is unclear what effect this may have on the findings. That being said, however, it was found during the coding process that participants commonly acknowledge when a comment belonging to the thread they contribute to is removed by moderators. This was another reason comments were analysed within the context of the thread to which they belong. Since the sample analysed above contained no such evidence of removal, it is unlikely, although far from certain, that the moderation practices of the Washington Post significantly skewed these findings.

A more deterministic interpretation of these findings, and an equally plausible one given previous research on the 'socially mediated publicness' of this platform, raises some cause for concern. Indeed, if the deliberative quality of political discussion on Facebook is, to some extent, determined by the affordances of the platform itself, as the literature on networked publics would suggest, the trend toward Facebook news consumption is somewhat worrying. It appears from the findings of the present study that, in line with this research, Facebook may inhibit deliberation amongst users, compared to other online platforms. As Facebook users experience a sense of publicness when engaging in online activities it seems that they are less likely to participate in the kind of discussion that is necessary for deliberation to occur. This is particularly worrying given the important role user comments play in the deliberative system, and the increasing numbers of Facebook users accessing news on the social network site.

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Paper 4: Civility 2.0: A Comparative Analysis of Incivility in Online Political Discussion³.

Abstract

In an effort to clean-up user comment sections, news organisations have turned to Facebook, the world's largest social network site as a way to make users more identifiable and accountable for the content they produce. It is hypothesized that users leaving comments via their Facebook profile will be less likely to engage in uncivil and impolite discussion, even when it comes to discussing politically sensitive and potentially divisive issues. By analysing the content of discussion as it occurs in response to political news content on the Washington Post Facebook, and comparing it to that which occurs on the Washington Post website where users are afforded a relatively high-level of anonymity, the present study determines the extent to which Facebook increases the level of civility and impoliteness in an area of political discussion renowned for uncivil and impolite communicative behaviour. In line with earlier theories of social interaction, the paper finds that political discussion on The Washington Post website is significantly more likely to be uncivil than discussion of the same content on the Washington Post Facebook page. Moreover, the incivility and impoliteness on the Washington Post website is significantly more likely to be directed towards other participants in the discussion compared to The Washington Post Facebook page.

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Introduction

According to Dryzek (2000), democratic theory has taken a decidedly deliberative turn in recent decades. In fact, it is often suggested that the deliberative variant has become *the* dominant approach in democratic theory. Although deliberative democrats are yet to agree on precisely what constitutes deliberation (Graham & Witschge, 2003), all agree that political conversation is a vital component of democratic society. Indeed, ‘it is through political conversation that members of society come to clarify their own views, learn about the opinions of others, and discover what major problems face the collective’ (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). Moreover, Scheufele (2001, p. 19) argues, ‘talking about certain issues with other citizens is a necessary condition for fully understanding those issues, for tying them to other, pre-existing knowledge, and consequently, for meaningfully participating in political life.’

Most deliberative democrats also agree that if discussion is to benefit individuals and society, participants must remain civil and respectful of one another. Indeed, civil discussion lies at the heart of democratic society (Dewey, 1927; Schudson, 1997). It smooths social interaction amongst citizens and provides a way to communicate with one another so that the potential for understanding, compromise and problem-solving is maintained (Smith & Bressler, 2013). Thus, civility has long been considered a valued indicator of a functioning democratic society (Papacharissi, 2004).

Thanks in large part to recent developments in the Internet and its associated technologies, citizens now have more opportunity than ever before to engage in political discussion with others. However, many sceptics believe that the relatively high-level of anonymity that this medium affords users exacerbates disinhibited communicative behaviour, leading to an increase in impolite and uncivil political discussion. Indeed, ‘[p]eople who are able to post anonymously (or pseudonymously) are far more likely to say awful things...

Speaking from behind a blank wall that shields a person from responsibility encourages recklessness – it's far easier to simply hit the “send” button without a second thought under those circumstances’ (Foxman & Wolf, 2013, p. 114).

Concerns over anonymity and uncivil communicative behaviour in computer-mediated communication are perhaps best exemplified in the case of user comment sections of online news content. As implemented by most news organisations, this feature provides users with a public space at the end of each article in which they are invited to contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise to the content produced by professional journalists (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). Importantly, this feature provides users with a relatively high-level of anonymity. Many commentators and editors believe that this characteristic has led to ‘the frequent occurrence of utterly aggressive content posted by some participants’ (Boczkowski, 1999, p. 105). Indeed, according to prominent journalist Leonard Pitts Jr., online comment sections have become ‘havens for a level of crudity, bigotry, meanness and plain nastiness that shocks the tattered remnants of our propriety’ (Pitts, 2010).

While empirical research suggests that uncivil communicative behaviour in these sections is considerably less common than one might expect (Canter, 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011), it remains unclear to what extent it is affected by anonymity. As such, news organisations continue to strive towards reducing anonymity in these sections and increasing users’ sense of accountability. In doing so, some organisations have turned to Facebook, the world’s largest social network site, as a potential remedy (see, among others, LA Times, USA Today, and the San Jose Mercury News). Based on anecdotal evidence (Foxman & Wolf, 2013; Orr, 2011), it is suggested that political discussion on Facebook will be more civil and less impolite than that which occurs on other platforms because users are both identified with, and accountable for, the content they produce.

The present study sets out to test this assumption. Specifically, this study analyses the content of political discussion as it occurs in the comment section of the Washington Post Facebook page, comparing it with the discussion that occurs on The Washington Post website. By analysing discussion relating to a single news source, we are able to identify how users of each platform respond to the same content, using the same communicative structure, simultaneously. Given that The Washington Post website affords users a relatively high level of anonymity, this comparison not only sheds light on how the deliberative quality of user comments might be affected by this shift towards Facebook, but how identifiability and accountability in a contemporary and naturally occurring online environment might influence the way citizens communicate about politics.

Anonymity and disinhibited behaviour

Understanding how anonymity and accountability influences behaviour has a long tradition in social psychology, dating back to Gustave Le Bon's classic work on crowd behaviour in 1895. In his influential book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895/2002), Le Bon observed how individuals, when forming part of a crowd, take on 'a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation' (2002, p. 4).

Le Bon's theory of submergence was reintroduced into mainstream social psychology by Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb in 1952. In their laboratory experiment on male undergraduate students, the authors set out to determine whether or not participants who could be identified individually would be more or less likely to express negative sentiments about their parents and their relationships with them. In line with Le Bon's theory, Festinger et al. (1952) found a positive significant correlation between the ability to identify who said what during discussions, and the number of positive sentiments about parents that were

expressed. In short, as identifiability increased, negativity decreased. The authors interpreted their findings as evidence of a psychological state in which individuals act as if they were submerged in the group. Such a state of affairs, according to Festinger et al. (1952, p. 382), 'may be described as one of de-individuation; that is, individuals are not seen or paid attention to as individuals.' Under conditions where the member is not individuated in the group, they continue, 'there is likely to occur for the member a reduction of inner restraints against doing various things' that they may normally consider anti-normative, such as expressing negative sentiments about their parents.

Deindividuation theory was subsequently developed and extended by Zimbardo (1969) through a series of experiments which would come to form the blueprint for future deindividuation research (Postmes & Spears, 1998). Although Zimbardo (1969) identified a number of "input" variables which cause deindividuated behaviour, broadly defined as 'behavior in violation of established norms of appropriateness' (1969, p. 251), much of his research clearly emphasized the importance of anonymity and lowered responsibility in reducing inhibited behaviour. In one of his most notorious studies, for example, Zimbardo (1969) conducted a laboratory experiment in which female undergraduate students were asked to deliver an "electric shock" to a confederate as an "aid to learning". The participants in the experimental group were given oversized lab coats, hoods, and were seated in separate cubicles in an effort to shield their identity. Participants in the control group, on the other hand, wore their own clothes and prominently displayed name tags and were introduced to one another before the experiment began. Zimbardo found that anonymous participants were significantly more likely to deliver longer shocks than their identifiable counterparts, presumably because they were anonymous and, by extension, unaccountable for their behaviour.

Concerned with the lack of realistic and naturalistic settings in which deindividuation research had been conducted, Diener and associates (1976) embarked upon a series of experiments designed to increase the external validity of this research. Perhaps the most notable of these was conducted on Halloween to assess the effects of deindividuation variables on stealing by trick-or-treaters. In particular, Diener, Fraser, Beaman, and Kelem (1976) tested three independent variables, one of which was anonymity. In the anonymous condition, no attempt was made to identify any of the costumed children, and the experimenter was not a member of the household, thereby removing any familiarity with the local neighbourhood children. In the non-anonymous condition, on the other hand, when the children knocked on a door, they were each asked for their name and where they lived, which was subsequently repeated back to them to make it clear this information had been retained by the experimenter. The experimenter then excused themselves from the front-door, leaving behind a bowl of candy/money, providing the trick-or-treaters with the opportunity to help themselves. In line with previous research, anonymity was found to be a significant predictor of stealing.

Anonymity in computer-mediated communication: the reduced social cues approach

It has often been argued that the conditions of computer-mediated communication (CMC), namely the relatively high-level of anonymity that this medium affords users, are similar to the conditions that cause the psychological state of deindividuation (Lea O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire 1986). Thus, it is hardly surprising that the theory has been used extensively to account for the occurrence of anti-normative social behaviour in CMC (Postmes & Spears, 1998).

Deindividuation theory was first tied to CMC by a number of influential scholars from the Committee on Social Science Research in Computing at Carnegie Mellon University

(Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire 1984; Siegel et al., 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Comparing CMC with other, more traditional forms of communication, their extensive body of research, collectively known as the 'reduced social cues' (RSC) approach, suggests that this medium is liable to produce relatively self-centered and un-regulated behaviour, leading to more extreme, impulsive, and less socially acceptable communicative behaviour (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), similar to that identified in previous research on deindividuation. This is because CMC lacks the vital social context cues necessary to regulate communicative behaviour. When communicators are able to perceive social context cues, they are able to adjust the target, tone, and verbal content of their communications in response to their interpretation of the situation. Typically, therefore, when social context cues are strong, behaviour tends to be well regulated and controlled (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), adhering to socially accepted norms of communication. However, when social context cues are weak or absent, as is often the case in CMC, communicators are afforded a semblance of anonymity that does not exist in other forms of communication. Consequently, communicators become relatively unconcerned with making a good appearance and become free from fears of retribution and rejection, as well as feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment (Siegel et al., 1986; Lee, 2005). This, it is argued, ultimately leads to less inhibited communication (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; 1991; Siegel et al., 1986; Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991).

Applied first to group behaviour using experimental methods, the RSC approach found that groups communicating electronically, when compared to groups communicating face-to-face, exhibited more anti-social behaviour and made more extreme decisions (Siegel et al., 1986). Similarly, electronic survey responses were found to be more extreme, more revealing, and less socially acceptable compared to those responses completed by hand (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Such a trend also applied to professional communication, where employees in a large organisation reported encountering significantly more uninhibited

behaviour, namely swear words, insults, and rudeness, in their electronic communications compared to face-to-face conversations. In fact, employees reported seeing flaming in their electronic communication on average 33 times a month, compared to just four times a month in their face-to-face encounters (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986).

Anonymity in CMC: the case of user comment sections

One area of CMC that has received considerable attention in light of these findings over recent years is the user comment sections of online news content. These sections were designed to provide readers with the space to contribute their own opinions, perspectives, and expertise to the content produced by professional journalists (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009) and to engage in debate and discussion of these issues with other users.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that ‘far from validating some high-minded ideal of public debate, message boards — particularly those inadequately policed by their newspapers and/or dealing with highly emotional matters — have become havens for a level of crudity, bigotry, meanness and plain nastiness that shocks the tattered remnants of our propriety’ (Pitts, 2010). The reason these sections have failed to live up to expectations, Pitts (2010) continues, is anonymity: ‘The fact that on a message board — unlike in an old-fashioned letter to the editor — no one is required to identify themselves, no one is required to say who they are and "own" what they've said, has inspired many to vent their most reptilian thoughts.’ Consequently, a number of media commentators and prominent journalists have called for an end to anonymity in an effort to clean up user comments (Wolf, 2011; Crovitz, 2010).

Although recent empirical research suggests that these sections may in fact facilitate public deliberation amongst readers (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008) and that the level of incivility amongst participants may be

significantly lower than many commenters believe (Canter, 2012), the lack of comparative research on this topic means we know little about the role anonymity plays in this context. As a result, news organisations continue to focus their efforts on reducing, or removing anonymity altogether from these sections, and increasing users' sense of accountability when commenting.

In an attempt to achieve this, a number of news organisations have turned to Facebook, the world's largest social network site (see, among others, Huff Post, LA Times, USA Today, and San Jose Mercury News).

Anonymity and accountability on Facebook: CMC in a Web 2.0 era

In 2011 Facebook unveiled an updated Comments Box plug-in which allows independent websites to require readers to comment via their Facebook profile. Unlike in most user comment sections, Facebook users are both identified with, and accountable for, the content they produce. Firstly, this is because Facebook is a community where people use their real identities. Like other SNSs, Facebook requires users to construct a public or semi-public (restricted) personality profile through which they can traverse the site, engage in its many social functions, and connect with other users to form social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, as Facebook's "Name Policy" reads, all users are required to use their real name when constructing their profile so that everyone knows exactly who they are connecting with. Users are also encouraged to maintain relatively open and identifiable profiles, via which they can be contacted by other users, that includes photos, educational affiliations, religious and political preferences, birthdays, and even the name of the person with whom they are in a relationship with. The availability of such information not only makes users identifiable, but also makes them accountable for their behaviour. Indeed, as Gross and Acquisti (2005) point out, the availability of identifiable information opens users

up to a variety of risks, including harassment, bullying, and online or physical stalking. When engaging in discussions, particularly about sensitive or emotionally charged political issues, therefore, users must be more aware of how they behave towards, and treat, other participants.

Secondly, users' sense of accountability on Facebook is heightened by the "News Feed" function, which automatically notifies all members of a users' network when they perform any public activity via their Facebook profile. When users log-on to Facebook, they are notified about what activities other members of their network are engaging in. Research has shown that when it comes to discussing politics, users remain acutely aware that other members of their networks will be able to see what has been said. Burkell, Fortier, Wong, and Simpson (2013), for example, found that participants in their study view and treat online social networks as public venues where 'everyone' can see what activity is occurring on theirs, and others' profiles. This is confirmed by the findings of Semaan, Robertson, Douglas, and Maruyama (2014) who, through a series of interviews, found that Facebook users were explicitly aware of the public nature of their political interaction. Indeed, as one interviewee in their study expressed,

“[w]ith Facebook there's a stamp of personal convention on what you post. I'm extremely liberal and if I would post something from the conservative slant because I felt people should be aware of that side... I would receive a TON of negative feedback... I was going against their expectations of me... so I stopped posting things like that there.” (Semaan et al., 2014: 8).

In an effort to determine the extent to which these unique characteristics of Facebook influence the level of civility and politeness in online political discussion, Halpern and Gibbs (2013) conducted a content analysis of user comments left on the White House Facebook page and the White House YouTube page. By analysing comments left in response to the

same source of online content, the differences between civility and politeness across the platforms is thought to result from the difference in the level of anonymity and accountability afforded users. In short, they found no difference in the amount of incivility between the two platforms, although there was a difference, as predicted, in the amount of impoliteness which occurred, with Facebook comments being significantly less likely to be coded as impolite.

Santana (2014) performed a similar analysis of user comments, this time in the context of online newspapers. Santana analysed the content of comments left in response to articles on the issue of immigration, comparing those left on anonymous forums with those left on identifiable forums, many of which required users to comment via their Facebook profile. Santana found that non-anonymous commenters, some of whom logged-in via Facebook, were nearly three times as likely to remain civil in their comments as those who were anonymous. Indeed, of the 369 uncivil comments in the sample, 65 percent were accounted for by anonymous commenters.

Given that the sample of anonymous comments were drawn from newspapers in the southern border-states, and compared to non-anonymous comments taken from a variety of mostly regional newspapers from outside of this region, it is unclear how much the difference in civility might be attributed to differences in the level of anonymity across the two samples. Since immigration is an issue that affects those in the border-states – and therefore those commenting anonymously – arguably more than it affects those living in other parts of the country (Santana, 2014), it is possible that the differences identified between the samples may be the result of additional factors. This is acknowledged by the author who himself suggests that a sample of anonymous and non-anonymous comments would preferably be drawn from the same newspaper (Santana, 2014, p. 26).

It is also possible that the occurrence of incivility in Santana's sample, as well as the difference between anonymous and non-anonymous comments, may be over-estimated given

the contentious nature of this issue. Indeed, as Halpern and Gibbs (2013) find, highly contentious topics of discussion generated a greater number of instances of impoliteness. This would explain why Santana (2014) found a considerably higher number of uncivil comments in his sample (41%) compared to previous research (Ruiz et al., 2011).

Given these weaknesses, the present study aims to build on the research which currently exists and contribute a greater understanding of the influence Facebook use may have on political discussion. In light of the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed thus far, it sets out to test two main hypotheses:

H₁ - User comments left on the Washington Post website will contain more instances of incivility and impoliteness than user comments left on the Washington Post Facebook page.

H₂ - Incivility and impoliteness on the Washington Post website is more likely to be directed towards other participants in the discussion compared to that on the Washington Post Facebook page.

Methodology

In an effort to determine whether or not identifiability and accountability on Facebook is associated with more civil and polite political discussion, this study analyses the content of political discussion as it occurs on the Facebook page of The Washington Post, comparing it with the discussion that occurs on The Washington Post website. The Washington Post is one of the most popular online newspapers in the United States (Alexa.com) and provides an ideal opportunity to test the extent to which identifiability and accountability on Facebook influences online political discussion. Indeed, not only does The Washington Post website afford users a relatively high-level of anonymity, but it also actively maintains a Facebook

page upon which it posts many of its articles. Moreover, the user comment section on the Washington Post website, at the time of analysis, was structured in the same way as the Washington Post Facebook page. By analysing discussion relating only to the Washington Post, therefore, we are able to identify how users of each platform respond to the same content, using the same communicative structure, simultaneously. In doing so, we increase the internal validity of our findings, meaning we may be more confident that any difference in communicative behaviour is a result of differences between the platforms, not other, intervening variables such as the structure of the comment section (Janssen & Kies, 2005) or the moderation policy employed by the news organisation (Ruiz et al., 2011).

Sample: User comments were selected for analysis using a two-stage sampling strategy. The first stage involved generating a stratified sample of political news articles over two-constructed weeks in the first half of 2013. Constructed week sampling was used as it remains arguably the most efficient way to compensate for the cyclical nature of daily news reporting (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Only two eligibility criteria were established for generating a selection of articles during the first stage of sampling. Firstly, only comments left in response to articles on the Washington Post “Politics” section, the “Post Politics” blog, “The Fix” blog, or the political science perspective section of the Post’s “Wonkblog” were eligible. Secondly, for the article to be eligible, it had to appear on both the Washington Post website and the Washington Post Facebook page simultaneously, allowing us to compare comments from the same articles, therefore removing the possibility that a particularly divisive issue or negatively framed article could skew the results. In total, 26 articles were included for the second stage of the sampling process (see Appendix, Figure 1. for a list of issues covered in the articles sampled).

The second stage involved generating a random sample of reader comments from the articles generated in the first stage of sampling. In total, from the 26 articles gathered over two randomly constructed weeks, 4502 comments were collected on the Washington Post's website, and 2304 comments on the Washington Post's Facebook page. For articles that received over 250 comments on either the Website or the Facebook page, a random selection of 250 comments from the article was entered into the sample pool. All website comments were entered into a database, as were the Facebook comments, where they were numbered chronologically and had all identifying information removed. Each comment was also given a number to signify from which article it was taken to aid in the analysis. A random sample of 1000 comments was then drawn, with 500 website comments and 500 Facebook comments selected independently. After spam messages and those not written in English were removed, a total of 498 Website comments, and 490 Facebook comments, remained for analysis. Interestingly, the sample contained no instances where comments had been removed by the forums moderator.

Measurement: Since a comprehensive and widely agreed-upon measure of civility remains elusive (Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014), a pre-existing coding scheme developed by Papacharissi (2004) was used to guide coding all comments for instances of democratic incivility and impoliteness. Although the coding scheme features many of the same categories used by other studies of incivility (see Jamieson & Falk, 1999; Santana, 2014), including a recent study by the National Institute for Civil Discourse (Kenski, Coe, & Rains, 2012), Papacharissi makes an important distinction between incivility and impoliteness. In line with previous research on the topic of incivility, Papacharissi (2004, p. 267) recognises that an exchange which involves poor manners is not necessarily uncivil and 'does not set a democratic society back.' Indeed, politics inevitably mobilizes strong opinions and passionate

feelings, thus impoliteness can often surface (Massaro & Stryker, 2012). This is particularly true online where anonymity makes it easier for individuals to be rude, although not necessarily uncivil. However, heated discussion and disagreement only becomes problematic when, according to Papacharissi, it disrespects the collective traditions of democracy. Incivility, according to this perspective, is defined as ‘a set of behaviours that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups’ (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267).

A three-item index was developed to determine whether or not online comments violated standards of democratic discourse as defined above. If a comment 1) verbalized a threat to democracy (e.g. proposed to overthrow a democratic government by force), 2) assigned stereotypes (e.g. associate person with a group using labels), or 3) threatened other individuals’ rights (e.g. personal freedom, freedom to speak), it was coded as uncivil and the type of incivility was noted.

A second index was developed in an effort to identify impoliteness. A comment was coded as impolite if it 1) contained name-calling, 2) cast aspersions, 3) accused others of lying, 4) used hyperbole, 5) used pejoratives for speech, 6) signalled non-cooperation and/or 7) sarcasm. An eighth, catch-all category of ‘other’ was also used in instances where the comment was deemed to be impolite by the coder but did not fall into the categories above. One such example of ‘other’ impoliteness would be comments written in capital letters, or partly in capitals, to symbolise shouting.

All uncivil and impolite messages were also coded for their direction. If an uncivil or impolite comment was directed at another commenter in the discussion it was labelled ‘interpersonal’, or ‘other-directed’ if it was directed at someone who was not present, for example a politician or journalist. The present coding scheme also coded direction as ‘neutral’, meaning it was not directed at any group or individual in particular, but was used

simply to articulate an argument. This third category was added after the data gathering process had begun as it soon became clear that incivility and impoliteness was often not aimed at others. Papacharissi also coded the direction of stereotypes as ‘antagonistic’ or ‘neutral’ depending on the type of language used and whether or not the stereotype was used to offend. However, the present coders were unable to agree upon instances of antagonism or neutrality in stereotypical language, thus they too were coded as ‘interpersonal’, ‘other-directed’, or ‘neutral’ in line with all other categories. Comments were often directed at multiple targets, and therefore could be coded for more than one direction.

Inter-coder reliability: Although all comments included in the analysis were coded by a single coder, a second coder was recruited in an effort to ensure reliability. The second coder undertook around 13 hours of training in order to become familiar with the method of content analysis, the units of analysis, and most importantly, the coding scheme and some of the literature from which the coding scheme was developed. After an initial pilot test, a subsample of 198 (20%) comments was selected at random from the final sample to determine reliability. After spam comments and those not written in English were removed, a total of 193 remained for analysis. Table 4.1 presents the reliability scores for the two coders.

Although all coefficients meet Landis and Koch’s (1977) criteria for good or very good agreement, given the lack of consensus regarding which reliability indices are most appropriate for which types of analysis, and what magnitude represents a satisfactory level of reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Campanella Bracken, 2002), coefficients for all individual categories of incivility and politeness are provided.

Table 4.1. Inter-coder agreement.

	Kappa
Threat to democracy	.664
Threat to individual rights	.855
Stereotype	.795
Name-calling	.815
Aspersions	.722
Lying	N/A
Vulgar	1
Pejorative	1
Hyperbole	.749
Non-cooperation	.662
Sarcasm	.714
Other impoliteness	.722
Uncivil	.767
Impolite	.776
Direction	.678

N = 193

N.B. All Kappa coefficients were generated using SPSS. Cohen's Kappa could not be calculated for the variable 'Lying' as one coder found no instances of it in the subsample.

Findings

In line with previous research, the majority of comments in our sample were neither uncivil nor impolite. This was true of both Website and Facebook comments. In fact, of the 498 Website comments which were analysed, only 30 (6%) were coded as containing at least one form of democratic incivility, while just 13 (2.7%) Facebook comments were coded the same way. The use of stereotypes was by far the most common form of democratic incivility in Website comments, with 22 of the 30 including stereotypes. An example of stereotyping in Website comments include the following contribution to a discussion which took place

between readers in response to an article about the length of waiting times at the previous Presidential election:

“Flori-duh is about the dumbest state I have ever lived in. People do not know how to vote because they do not read newspapers or pay attention to the news. They stand in line for voting just to take time off of work.”

This is just one of 22 instances in which users of the Website version of the Washington Post assigned a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular person or groups of people.

Only eight Website comments included instances of threats to individual rights. The following comment is part of a discussion on the problem of voting waiting times and provides a typical example of a comment which advocates restricting the rights or freedoms of certain members of society:

“an easy fix ... anyone receiving welfare should not be allowed to vote anyway -- they are effectively children ... that simple change would shave about 40million off the voting rolls where they have no right to be anyway.”

Threats to Democracy was the least common type of uncivil communicative behaviour on the Website version of the Washington Post, with only five comments coded as containing this type of language. A typical example of this type of incivility can be seen in the following comment:

“Many revolutions start with one small spark, President Obama has set this one off with his presser with the children and his use of the executive orders. The question is, is this the revolution that he had in mind? Time will tell.”

Although the nature of democratic incivility on the Washington Post Facebook page was similar to that on the Website, there were considerably less instances of it and it was shared evenly between stereotypes (5), threats to individual rights (5), and threats to democracy (4). In order to test our hypothesis, and determine whether or not this difference between Website comments and Facebook comments was significant, the total number of uncivil instances was calculated and a chi-square test was conducted to determine whether or not the difference in the amount of incivility was statistically significant across the two platforms. Table 4.2 presents the result of this test. With a chi-square value of 6.742, we can be 99% confident that the difference in our sample between Website comments and Facebook comments has not occurred by chance, but is reflective of our wider population.

As expected, impoliteness was considerably more common amongst all commenters than incivility. However, unlike incivility, both Website and Facebook comments contained a similar amount of impoliteness. 172 of the 498 (34.5%) Website comments contained some form of impoliteness while 159 of the 490 (32.4%) Facebook comments contained similar content. The most common form of impoliteness among Website commenters was Sarcasm (10.2%), followed by name-calling (8.8%) and aspersions (8.4%), while Facebook impoliteness mostly involved name-calling (11.2%) and “Other” impoliteness (7.3%).

Table 4.2. Civility by platform type.

	Website	Facebook	
Threat to Democracy	5	4	
Threat to rights	8	5	
Stereotype	22	5	
Uncivil (total number of comments containing incivility)	30	13	χ^2 6.742 ($p < .01$)

N.B. Some comments contain more than one form of incivility. Due to the relatively small numbers of observation in each cell, χ^2 was only calculated for total numbers of uncivil comments.

Table 4.3 presents the zero-order relationship between platform type and our various indicators of impoliteness. It shows that, in line with the hypothesis, Website comments and Facebook comments differ significantly when coded for sarcasm ($\chi^2 = 4.419 p < .05$) and aspersions ($\chi^2 = 4.337 p < .05$). However, when all forms of impoliteness are combined to create a simple dichotomous variable, the difference between platform type is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = .484 p > .05$).

Given the increase in identifiability and accountability that comes with commenting via Facebook, the relationship between platform type and the direction of incivility and impoliteness was also tested. It is hypothesized that Facebook comments will exhibit significantly less interpersonal incivility and impoliteness than Website comments which are more likely to be directed towards other individuals participating in the discussion. Table 4.4 presents the results of this analysis. As expected, it shows that almost half of all uncivil and impolite comments left on the Website were directed at other commenters participating in the discussion (46.6%). In contrast, less than a quarter of uncivil and impolite comments left on Facebook were classed as interpersonal. A chi-square value of 20.059 ($p < .001$) confirms this

Table 4.3. Impoliteness by platform type.

	Website	Facebook	χ^2
Name-calling	44	55	1.564
Aspersions	42	25	4.337 ($p < .05$)
Lying	5	5	.001
Vulgar	3	9	N/A
Pejorative	2	1	N/A
Hyperbole	15	12	.295
Non-cooperation	5	1	N/A
Sarcasm	51	32	4.419 ($p < .05$)
Other	29	36	.933
Impoliteness (total number of comments containing impoliteness)	172	159	.484

N.B. Some comments contain more than one form of incivility. Due to the relatively small numbers of observations in some cells, χ^2 was only calculated where both cells had 5 or more observations.

Table 4.4. Interpersonal incivility/impoliteness and platform type.

	Website	Facebook	
Interpersonal	89	41	<math>\chi^2 20.059 ($p < .001$)</math>

difference is a significant one, meaning that Website commenters were far more likely to be impolite to one another than were Facebook commenters.

Discussion

Recent developments in the Internet and its associated technologies have provided citizens with more opportunity than ever before to engage in discussions about politics and public issues. However, many sceptics remain concerned about the relatively high-level of anonymity that this medium affords users, blaming it for the occurrence of uncivil and uninhibited communicative behaviour online. This is particularly true when it comes to discussing political news content in user comment sections. Although there is little empirical evidence to support claims that these sections have become defined by the “rampant incivility” that some claim (Santana, 2014), news organisations continue to develop methods for reducing anonymity in these sections and increasing users’ sense of accountability when posting comments.

The growth of online social network sites, particularly Facebook, have generated optimistic expectations of a more civil and polite online deliberative environment. Indeed, as Facebook users are identified with, and accountable for, the content they produce, it is expected that its users will be less likely to engage in uncivil and impolite political discussion compared to those commenting in anonymous online settings. Consequently, news organisations have begun adopting Facebook technology in an effort to clean up user comments.

The present study seeks to determine the extent to which user comments on Facebook are more civil and polite than those on the anonymous forums of news websites. In doing so, it compares the occurrences of incivility and impoliteness in reader comments left on the politics sections of the Washington Post website, with reader comments left in response to the same articles on the Washington Post Facebook page. The study makes a number of important findings. Firstly, the occurrence of uncivil communicative behaviour in reader comments is significantly more common on the website version of the Washington Post,

where users are able to maintain their anonymity, compared to the Facebook version of the Washington Post, where commenters are identified with, and accountable for, their content. Secondly, the uncivil and impolite behaviour that was identified on the Washington Post website was significantly more likely to be interpersonal, meaning it is directed towards others participating in the discussion. This is in contrast to the Washington Post Facebook page where instances of incivility and impoliteness were more likely to be aimed at individuals not involved in the discussion, or used as a way to articulate an argument, rather than offend others.

The analysis does however highlight that the differences between platforms was not significant across all indicators of impoliteness. In those cases where it was, the differences were often not as large as those found by Santana (2014) in a similar study.

While these findings offer some empirical support to those individuals calling for an end to anonymity in user comment sections and those news organisations embracing Facebook technology, the analysis also finds that the overall level of incivility was low. In fact, just four percent of the comments across both platforms contained uncivil behaviour. While as expected impoliteness was more common amongst participants, with 33 percent of comments being coded as impolite, just 13 percent of the uncivil and impolite comments combined were directed towards fellow participants in the discussion. This is in-line with previous research which finds that the majority of comments in these sections are neither uncivil nor impolite and that participants do not seem intent on antagonising one another as is often suggested.

Despite these positive findings, there are a number of limitations worth noting here. Firstly, it could be argued that the emphasis on internal validity comes at the expense of generalizability. By using a single political news source allows us to hold constant many variables which differ across platforms and news outlets, our conclusions are valid only when

it comes to readers of the Washington Post. Although there is little to suggest that The Washington Post differs significantly from any other major US online newspaper, without further research we cannot make such a claim. However, given the breadth of online news in the US, any attempt to construct a generalizable sample would almost certainly be futile. Thus, internal validity was given priority in this context.

A second limiting factor refers to the fact, while the design characteristics of certain online platforms enable and constrain their use by different actors, thus shaping the way their users behave, the skills, goals, and culture of their users may also affect the way they are used (Kavada, 2012). Hence, it is possible that the differences between online platforms that have been identified here may not be a direct result of differences in the design of the chosen platforms, but rather a difference in the skills, goals, and culture of those news commenters using Facebook to access the Washington Post.

Thirdly, it would have been preferable to code entire threads of comments as opposed to individual comments. This would have provided a greater insight into how the structure of discussions may have influenced the level of civility and politeness that ensued. However, given the limited resources available, this would have greatly reduced the generalizability of these findings.

Although these limitations are not to be ignored, the findings provide an insight in to the way users on Facebook engage in political discussion and how a heightened sense of accountability in this context influences uninhibited communicative behaviour. They also represent an important first step in understanding how the unique characteristics of Facebook may shape political discussion as it continues to grow in popularity.

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Appendix.

Figure 1.1. Issues covered by the Washington Post Politics sections over 2-constructed weeks (January-June 2013).

Monday	January 28 2013	Gun control
		Immigration
		Scott Brown (Former Senator)
	April 8 2013	2012 Election
Tuesday	March 26 2013	Same-sex marriage
		Voter I.D. legislation
	April 16 2013	Immigration
Wednesday	January 16 2013	Fox News
		Gun control
		Hurricane Sandy relief
	June 5 2013	Baby names (Rep vs. Dem)
		Knife ban
		Joe Biden
Thursday	February 7 2013	Marco Rubio (R-FL)
		Same-sex marriage
		Robert Menendez (D-NJ)
	June 27 2013	Rick Perry (Governor, TX)
		Immigration
Friday	March 15 2013	Grand jury
		Death Penalty
	May 31 2013	Tea Party
Saturday	January 26 2013	Sarah Palin (Former Governor)
		Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton
	June 8 2013	Gun control
Sunday	February 3 2013	Immigration
	April 28 2013	White House Correspondents Dinner

Conclusions

Introduction

This thesis explores the potential for social network sites to influence the political behaviour of their users. In particular, it examines the role social network sites play in mediating the relationship between mass-mediated news use and political behaviour. Unlike much of the research in this area, the thesis focuses on the role of mass-mediated news and its impact on traditional forms of political participation. Since most scholars focus instead on the transformative potential of social network sites, we currently know little about this relationship.

This final section revisits the key findings of each paper. It considers how the findings of each paper relate to one another and highlights areas where our knowledge remains limited. It concludes by identifying areas that remain underdeveloped or unexplored in this field of research. It focuses specifically on the rise of mobile communication and the democratic implications this technology may have on those who encounter news content on social network sites via mobile technology.

Political participation

Paper 1 and Paper 2 find limited evidence to suggest that everyday uses of social network sites will lead to an increase in political participation. In line with expectations, Paper 1 reports evidence of a positive relationship between everyday social network site use and an arguably low-intensity form of political participation; signing a petition. It also found that social network site users who had signed a petition were more likely to have done so online than offline. This finding supports recent research which suggests that the Internet and its associated technology is likely to engender particular forms of political participation that are easily conducted online (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009; Shulman, 2005).

Building on this finding, Paper 2 set out to estimate the extent to which everyday uses of social network sites increase participation (or slacktivism as the case may be) by inadvertently exposing users to news content and political information. The results of this analysis are somewhat mixed. Although a positive *indirect* effect of everyday social network site use on another relatively low-intensity form of participation (buying certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons) *via* inadvertent news and information exposure was established, this pattern was not evident across all low-intensity forms of political participation. In fact, the very lowest-intensity forms of participation included in the analyses (such as sending an email or message supporting a social or political cause and signing a petition) were in no way related to everyday social network site use, either directly or indirectly. While it could be argued, therefore, that when taken together the findings from Paper 1 and Paper 2 may have occurred by chance, both papers establish evidence of a relationship between everyday social network site use and low-intensity forms of political participation. Although such “slacktivist” forms of participation are commonly derided as superficial and less meaningful than more intense forms of political action, they may potentially represent the first step in raising an individuals’ political awareness and interest, leading to a subsequent increase in other forms of political participation over time.

Before drawing this conclusion, however, it is important to highlight a number of limitations affecting the findings of both papers however. Firstly, both papers rely on self-reported measures of media exposure. Measures of self-reported media exposure used in survey research are notoriously unreliable (Hovland, 1959), largely due to the inability of people to recall their political exposure and experiences (Bradburn, Rips, & Shevell, 1987; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995). This is especially true of self-reported measures of *inadvertent* exposure.

However, it is worth noting here the inherent difficulties associated with replicating the causal mechanism under investigation using other methods. Experimental methods, for example, offer considerable advantages over the survey method in many instances. Among other advantages, experimental methods would allow us to identify precisely how much news content and political information users are exposed to. However, researchers cannot easily control the type and volume of content being shared amongst members of a given social network. Any attempt to join a network in order to manipulate the content being shared in an experimental setting would almost certainly exert some kind of ‘hawthorne effect’ (Landsberger, 1958) given the social desirability of news and information consumption over that of entertainment content and gossip which is typically shared on these sites (Boyd, 2008). Surveys may therefore represent a useful tool, particularly at this early stage in the evolution of social network site research.

A second limitation relates to the measures of political participation employed in both papers. The data collected by the Oxford Internet Institute (Dutton, Helsper, & Gerber, 2009; Dutton & Blank, 2011) asks respondents only about their participation in traditional forms of political participation. Yet, it is often argued that social network sites have created entirely new forms of political participation (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Loader & Mercea, 2012). Facebook users can signal their support for a political candidate or issue, for example, simply by clicking the “like” button. Twitter users, on the other hand, can do so by “retweeting” other people’s messages of support. Both forms of participation are equivalent to expressing support for a political candidate or issue, although they would not necessarily be reported as such in the OxIS data. Similarly, Google+ users may “hang-out” with a political candidate or elected official, thereby establishing contact with them. Again, this form of contact is not recognised by the OxIS as a form of political participation. While it is easy to conclude from the findings in Paper 1 and Paper 2 that there simply is no relationship

between everyday social network site use and political participation, more research is needed that incorporates these new forms of engagement.

Despite these limitations, the findings are good news for an increasingly troubled news industry. As news organisations look towards social network sites to promote their brands and their content (Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014; Mitchell, Jurkowitz, & Olmstead, 2014), it appears that this tactic is working. Social network site users, which now represent large swathes of the population, are increasingly exposed to content produced by news organisations, even if they are not looking for it. However, it appears that while the number of users who encounter news and political information is on the up, the number of users who actually “get” the news is not (Geer, Lau, & Vavreck, 2008; Price & Zaller, 1993).

Deliberation

A growing body of research indicates that the effects of news and information on participatory behaviour is largely channeled through interpersonal communication (e.g. McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Rojas, Shah, Cho, Schmierbach, Keum, & Gil-de-Zuñiga, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; Shah, Cho, Nah, Gotlieb, Hwang et al., 2007; Scheufele, 2001). According to much of this literature, mass communication’s influence is strong, but itself indirect, shaping political engagement through its effects on discussion and reflection about public affairs. Indeed, users who engage in discussion about the content they consume are more likely to reflect on, and process, news and information. This promotes a better understanding of the political world and may provide a stronger cognitive base for political participation than factual political knowledge (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; see also Robinson & Levy, 1986).

In light of the findings in Paper 1 and Paper 2, therefore, Paper 3 and Paper 4 investigate the communicative processes that typically precede participation. By identifying differences in the way social network site users discuss political news and information, these

papers may help us better understand why social network site users are less engaged in the political process.

The findings from these latter papers are mixed. On the one hand, it appears that the unique technological affordances of social network sites encourage users to remain civil when discussing sensitive political issues. Indeed, when compared to direct news users who engage in discussion in forums providing a relatively high-level of anonymity, Facebook news users were significantly less likely to exhibit uncivil communicative behaviours. Yet, at the same time it appears that those same affordances (identifiability and accountability) may inhibit the quality of these discussions. In short, discussion amongst Facebook users was significantly *less* likely to; (a) be relevant to the topic being addressed in the article or discussed in the thread to which the comment belongs, (b) be more ideologically balanced, (c) offer alternatives to the policies being reported on or solutions to the problems being discussed, (d) reference, or include, additional and/or external sources of information and/or data, (e) pose questions to other commenters in an effort to withdraw additional information or gain greater clarity, and (f) refer to, or address, other comments and/or participants.

These findings offer some explanation for the apparent lack of relationship between social network site use and political participation. While general discussion about politics is thought to increase the likelihood that participants will become engaged in politics, the more deliberative the discussion, the stronger the effect is thought to be (Rojas et al., 2005). Thus a lack of deliberative discussion amongst social network site users may to some extent explain why they are less likely to subsequently participate than those who engage in more deliberative discussions on other platforms.

These findings are explained by the relatively high-level of identifiability and accountability that Facebook users experience. Indeed, they are consistent with a growing body of literature examining the impact of the Internet and its associated technologies on the

deliberative process (Baym & Boyd, 2012; Burkell, Fortier, Wong, & Simpson, 2014; Semaan, Robertson, Douglas, Maruyama, 2014). Yet, it is possible that the differences in the quality of deliberation between direct news users and Facebook news users is explained not by the technological affordances of these platforms, but rather the way users are exposed to content on them. As illustrated in both Paper 1 and Paper 2, social network site users are more likely to encounter news and political information inadvertently, when using these sites for other purposes. On the contrary, direct news users have actively chosen to access this type of content, suggesting a predisposition for engaging in political discussion (Rojas et al., 2005).

The differences may in part be explained, therefore, as an audience effect, not simply a platform effect. News users who actively seek to engage in discussion about the content they consume are likely more knowledgeable about it than those who encounter the same content – or even just a headline – inadvertently. It is also likely then that they are better equipped to articulate arguments and more willing to engage in deliberative discussions than those less familiar with the topic.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the rather constrained conceptualisation of rational deliberation used here may be less favourable to social network sites when comparing them to other online discussion platforms. Indeed, although the quality of political discussion on social network sites may not, on the surface, be of similar standard to other online news forums, this very characteristic is one of its strengths. After all, such models of deliberative democracy, which privilege a particular style of rational communication, are clearly less accessible and inclusive of a wider range of diverse participants (Brundidge, 2010).

Final thoughts

The suggestion that the differences in deliberative quality across platforms may be explained as either an audience effect or a platform effect is of great importance. Indeed, it is easy to interpret the findings of these papers as evidence that technology shapes the way users participate in and discuss politics. It is equally easy to dismiss them as evidence that people use technology congruent with task demands (Fulk, Steinfeld, Schmitz, & Power, 1987). The present thesis advocates a middle ground, or a third perspective that lies somewhere in between (see Baym, 2010). It argues that technology does not dictate behaviour; human behaviour online is not fundamentally different from human behaviour offline. Yet, to suggest that advancements in communications technologies will have no impact on politics is equally short-sighted. Katz and Aakhus (2002) speak of technologies having “logics” or “apparateists” that influence but do not determine use. Indeed, “[m]achines do not make history by themselves. But some kinds of machines make different kinds of histories... than others (Douglas, 2004, p. 21).

Further research

The present thesis argues that the technological affordances of social network sites have transformed the way users encounter and engage with news content online. Furthermore, it argues that these changes have the potential to affect users’ political behaviour, influencing both the way they participate and deliberate. In the remainder of this section it is argued that the platform through which users access these sites may introduce new affordances of their own with which users must contend. In particular, users are increasingly accessing social network sites through various mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. Consequently, social network sites, and the content that appears on them, have in many instances been

designed to function specifically on mobile devices. It will be argued that these affordances might have democratic implications of their own.

The rise of mobile

Mobile communication has become one of the most dynamic sectors of growth in twenty-first century communications (Dutton, Law, Groselj, Hangler, Vidan et al., 2014). Indeed, in the past decade mobile communication has become essential to everyday life for most people (Dutton, Grant, & Groselj, 2013; Dutton et al., 2014; Kantar Media [Ofcom], 2014).

Mobile communication has become a major area of growth in social network sites. In September 2014, Facebook reported having 1.32 billion active users worldwide. Of these, 1.12 billion accessed the site using a mobile device such as a smartphone or tablet. Consequently, Facebook now derives roughly a third of its advertising revenue from mobile alone (Mitchell et al., 2013).

Alongside social network sites, news content is among the most popular mobile content. In the United States, for example, 64 percent of tablet owners and 62 percent of smartphone owners use their devices to access news at least once a week. Given the rapid diffusion of mobile device ownership within the population, a third of all US adults now regularly get news on a mobile device (Mitchell, Rosenstiel, Santhanam, & Christian, 2012). A similar trend has emerged in the United Kingdom where desktop/laptop access to online news has fallen by 23 percent in the past year (Newman & Levy, 2014). Smartphone and tablet access to news content, on the other hand, have increased by 11 percent since 2013 (Newman & Levy, 2014). A survey conducted on behalf of Ofcom, the UK communications industries regulator, also found that when compared to desktops/laptops, access to news content on a mobile device has seen the most significant rise, from just 3 percent in 2007 to 17 percent in 2014 (Kantar Media [Ofcom], 2014).

It is this trend toward mobile news access, particularly as it occurs on social network sites, which warrants further research and investigation. Indeed, mobile access to online content presents users with a unique set of challenges and opportunities which carry with them the potential to influence the way news is consumed and, in turn, its effect on political behaviour. These challenges and opportunities include, among others, small (touch)screens, limited data storage, and ubiquitous information access (Shim, You, Lee, & Go, 2015). For instance, the potentially small screen size and limited data storage of most mobile devices may limit encounters with and/or consumption of content-rich news articles (Shim et al., 2015). It is plausible, then, that mobile news consumers may be less informed than desktop/laptop news consumers who are afforded greater technological capability.

Contrarily, mobile devices provide ubiquitous information access, opening up opportunities for users to consume more news content than ever before. Indeed, recent research suggests that rather than displacing traditional sources of news content, mobile devices are largely used to complement them (Dimmick, Feaster, & Hoplamazian, 2011). Specifically, mobile devices allow users to exploit gaps in their daily routines when/where other more traditional channels of communication are unavailable, inappropriate or inconvenient (Dimmick et al., 2011). From this perspective, therefore, mobile news consumers may be the most informed of all.

Clearly, the rise of mobile communication has important implications for how users access social network sites and how they encounter news content when doing so. Since this is a relatively underdeveloped theme in social network site research, it represents a logical next step in the quest to better understand the democratic consequences of news exposure on social network sites.

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