

INTERACTIVITY AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: NEW MEDIA TOOLS AND THEIR IMPACT ON PUBLIC POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Based on the interactivity theory, this study examines relationships between people's political media commentary online and through traditional methods. Data from Pew Research Center (N= 2,253) shows that those who were actively participated in political discourse using traditional methods were more likely to make statements on newspaper websites and using social media about politics. Higher level of education also predicted participation in political communication in the new media environment.

Keywords: Interactivity, Motivation, New Media, Traditional Media, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Methods for news reporting and reception are changing with the audience no longer are limited to consuming news (Carr, Barnidge, Lee, & Tsang, 2014; Scott, Millard, & Leonard, 2014). There are more information sources and new means to interact with information. Political communication online is an interesting niche market because of its devotees. Enhanced connectivity and information availability have transformed what people know and how they know it, because more information is available now than any time in history (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008). The web has altered the production and distribution of news content. Staffs at media companies communicate in real-time with their audiences using social media, email, or online commenting. Media companies have numerous opportunities to interact with their audience. It is important to consider interactive tools are being both used by consumers and diffused by the news industry.

The use of interactive features online has increased political involvement (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013). The question is are those increases are among people already involved in politics or these interactive features are attracting new involvement (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Increased political interaction online is particularly true for the younger audience; who are considered politically apathetic (Vitak et al., 2011). Media companies can enhance interactivity

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with measures such as providing opportunities for the public to communicate with journalists, allowing the audience more control over comment forums, and making participation as simple as possible to encourage interaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New communication technologies have redefined many concepts in mass communication (Kiouisis, 2002). The Internet shifted communication from traditional one-way to multimodal model (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Schultz, 2000). This leads to interactivity theory, which is important because most online communication tools are designed around interaction. Interactivity is often used synonymously with communication on the web (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). Interactivity theory examines people's captivation with communication possibilities inherent in computer-mediated groups, which could include sharing media content or social media posting (McMillan & Hwang, 2002; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). Interactivity theory argues that increased interaction between the audience and the media outlet leads to a more engaged audience (Ha & James, 1998; Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1998). The theory surmises that frequent and positive interaction between journalists and their audience will benefit coverage and increase audience participation and time spent on websites. It is further assumed that the audience wants to interact with the communicator (Ha & James, 1998). Interactive communication methods offered online led to the development of interactivity theory to discuss forms of computer-mediated communication (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

Interactivity has dramatically increased due to new web-based communication channels (Kiouisis, 2002). For example, Facebook, Twitter, and comment boards on newspaper websites are new media channels through which people argue and discuss political issues. Among these, Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa (2014) found Facebook to be the most significant social media to receive political news. Additionally, 75% of respondents to a Pew questionnaire of more than 2,000 adults used Facebook for political commentary, compared to about 25% each for Twitter, Google Plus, and LinkedIn (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014).

Social media helps diffuse news online and focuses on interaction. Increased interaction on social media increases political engagement (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). In the same vein, Chan and Guo (2013) found online media consumption and use of Facebook were significant factors in determining political activity among American youth. Facebook and Twitter offer a place for young people to meet, discuss, or plan political actions (Chan & Guo, 2013). Many politically active groups of young people use social media to distribute political information (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Youth engage in political interactions online because these platforms offers greater equality online because they find these platforms liberal and more open to their comments compared to traditional offline organizations (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013).

While not as popular, Twitter offers a way to receive, interact, and disseminate news to other users while at the same time it creates a community among participants (Hull & Lewis, 2014). Social media represents a technical advancement in interactivity.

The form has changed the way people receive and interact with media content. People have no issue with seeing a news story on Facebook or Twitter, adding their own comment, and retweeting or sharing the news with friends or followers. This is because the structure of online interactions. Social media does not have the traditional relationship of sender and receiver; everyone is on an equal footing with the ability to do both (Becker, Clement, & Schaedel, 2010). This is in opposition to most commercial media sites where the audience is mostly a passive news recipient.

In spite of the development of interactive media tools online, questions remain about their use. Online interactivity remains low, but those who use interactive measures represent a growing minority (Chung & Nah, 2009; Larsson, 2011). Users want interactive options available, they appreciate online interactivity more than they use it, (Chung & Nah, 2009; Larsson, 2011). These interactions could include posting on Facebook, tweeting stories, commenting on news articles, sharing articles, or a variety of other options. Research has shown electronic participation in politics is multidimensional, which indicates those who interact tend to do so in multiple ways (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). In contrast, communicating through traditional means includes phone calls, letters to the editor, or even mail correspondence.

Internet access is a necessity for political interaction online. Digital divide, caused due to factors such as income, education, age, accessibility in some areas, and excessive cost in other locations (Guillen & Suarez, 2006), restricts potential Internet users from participating in political communication. Increased Internet use nationally has helped to bridge the divide (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). However, a segment of the older population avoids the Internet for gratification reasons and remain separated by choice (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). When it comes to Generation Y nearly everyone uses social media (Bolton, et al., 2014). Overall, social media are increasing people's ability to comment on news, and politics more specifically online.

Hypotheses

H1: Age will be positively related to political communication using traditional methods such as letters to the editor or phone conversations that are not Internet-based.

Individuals who pay attention to politics and integrate information via the media tend to know more about political issues and be more politically active (Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005). Those who are politically active tend to consume more media overall (Scheufele, 2002). Therefore I expect that those who are politically active will be more likely to interact with the media. Interactivity theory argues that identification with something, like a political cause or candidate, would be highly tied to someone's motivation to participate (Rafaelli & Ariel, 2008). Therefore based on the theory those who comment on politics would so using the more interactive forms offered by digital media.

H2: Higher levels of income will be positively related to commenting on online stories or on social media.

H3: Higher levels of education will be positively related to commenting on online stories or on social media.

These hypotheses relate to interactivity theory using the concept of the digital divide. Digital literacy skills are one of the most important factors in bridging the digital divide at all levels of education (Peña-López, 2010). The younger population is digital natives and therefore those who do not learn digital literacy skills fall further behind (Smith, 2012). Technology alone does not turn students into digital natives, and education is important (Smith, 2012). Income is also a factor. Those with lower incomes are less likely to use online technology and therefore online interaction with others is limited (Choi & DiNitto, 2013; Zhang, 2013). Countries that are more developed have faster Internet diffusion and shorter lag times in the populace developing Web skills (Zhang, 2013). Those with higher incomes have more interest and efficacy in all types of online communication. In both cases these groups are more likely to interact online simply because they are more likely to have access and use the Internet to communicate with others. Those with higher incomes and education levels tend to use the Internet in ways that help to protect their place in society (van Deursen, van Dijk, & Peter, 2015). Their study showed an increasing number of people using the web for interaction. It further found that both education and income levels were statistically significant (van Deursen, van Dijk, & Peter, 2015).

H4: Those who comment about news stories online will also be the respondents most likely to respond using traditional means.

People who are into political news tend to communicate their views making sure that others know what they think (Ellis, 2014). The Internet is a key source for political information (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). The emergences of interactive web sites have facilitated, at least in part, the growth of online political behavior (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

H5: Age is negatively related to interacting with political news stories published on the Internet.

The younger population best receives web-based political communication (Xenos & Foot, 2008). For youth the least common methods of political participation were writing a letter to a newspaper or writing an article for a magazine or newspaper (Vitak et al., 2011). The most common were posting to a Facebook wall or a politically oriented status message (Vitak et al., 2011). Overall activity that took less work was most popular (Vitak et al., 2011). Online expression is simply easier for certain types of tasks and discussions (Walther, 1996). The effects of online communication tools on the political activity of the younger population were visible in the 2008 presidential election (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011). In a study of college students, Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) showed that online expression was significantly related to situational political involvement. Since younger people are moving much of their communication to online means interactivity theory would argue that they will comment using the means with which they are most comfortable.

METHODS

This study uses a survey from the Pew Research Center as the primary source of data. The instrument is part of a phone questionnaire conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International for Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project (Pew Research Center, 2013). There were 2,253 adults who participated, including 900 who responded via cell phones; landline telephones were used to contact the remaining respondents (Pew Research Center, 2013). Princeton Survey Research Associates International conducted interviews between July 16, 2012 and Aug. 7, 2012; there was a 95% confidence interval (Pew Research Center, 2013). Most questions had a sampling margin of error of 2%, Internet and social media questions had a 3% error rate (Pew Research Center, 2013). Random dialing was used to reach respondents (Pew Research Center, 2013).

This study included questions about age and commenting on politics using traditional or new media methods. The first independent variable for this study is age, which is an interval variable. The mean age is 52.62, the range was 79, and the standard deviation is 19.52 (Pew Research Center, 2013). When looking at issues involving the digital divide, it is also important to look at the variables of income and education. Low income keeps a number of people from using the Internet with 34% of those under 60, and 17% of those over 60 using the web (Choi & DiNitto, 2013). Income as a variable helps to define the digital divide and is the most influential factor that determines access to the Internet (Hilbert, 2010). Education is a significant factor to someone's use of the Internet for all people regardless of their skill level with the web (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). Globally education is the most consistent predictor of someone's Internet use (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). Lower education levels were significantly different in both the ability to complete online tasks and time spent online (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010).

The second independent variable traditional communication was operationally defined as the answer represented Question 14 of the survey, "How often do you discuss politics and public affairs with others in person, by phone call, or by letter?" (Pew Research Center, 2013). The potential answers were every day, at least once a week, at least once a month, never, don't know, and refused, resulting in an ordinal level scale (Pew Research Center, 2013). This question design showed how often someone commented in person, by phone, or through a letter to another person about politics and public affairs. There were 369 (16.4%) respondents who discuss politics daily, 626 (27.8%) weekly, 416 (18.5%) monthly, 325 (14.4%) less than monthly, and 499 (%) never discuss politics (see table 1). There were 14 respondents who refused to answer and 4 who stated they did not know.

The dependent variable operationally defined by Question 15, "How often do you discuss politics and public affairs with others ONLINE – such as by e-mail, on a social networking site or by text message? Would you say every day, at least once a week, at least once a month, less than once a month, or never?" (Pew Research Center, 2013). This is also an ordinal variable (Pew Research Center, 2013). The frequency table showed that 110 respondents representing 5.7% used online techniques to comment about politics and a combined 19% comment online at least one a week. There were

56.3% of respondents, which represented 1090 people, who never comment about politics online (see table 2). The figures must be viewed in relation to Pew studies over time, which does show adoption of online commenting (Pew Research Center, 2013). There were 5.7% of people who commented online daily with the remainder commenting weekly or less frequently.

The operational definition independent variable of political activity was a combined interval variable derived from combining the following questions about respondent activities from the Pew dataset: attended a political rally or speech; attended an organized protest of any kind; attended a political meeting on local, town or school affairs; worked or volunteered for a political party or candidate; been an active member of any group that tries to influence public policy or government, not including a political party; worked with fellow citizens to solve a problem in your community. This variable was created to indicate who was truly active in politics amongst the Pew respondents.

FINDINGS

Spearman's Rho correlations were used to determine relationships because the variables are at the interval and ordinal levels. The correlation tests showed significant results between several variables. In terms of demographic data both income and education indicated moderate correlations between income and education and if respondents commented on political issues using traditional means. There were weak and very weak correlations between those who comment about political issues online and both income and education (see table 3). This relationship seems to predict that individuals who discuss politics with others will do so regardless of how the communication occurs. There was not a significant relationship between age and either of the commenting variables, meaning that H1, Age will be positively related to interpersonal communication and communication by mail or telephone, and H5, Age is negatively related to interacting with political news stories published on the Internet were not supported because the null cannot be rejected. This study seems to indicate that age is not a factor.

The two hypothesis related to demographics are being considered together. H2, which higher levels of income will be positively related to commenting on online stories or on social media, was supported. The regression showed statistical significant however it was a low level. H3 was supported both correlations and regressions however both were also a low levels of support. When considering both H2 and H3 it can be ascertained that while there is some effect of demographic variables that effect is not large. Age and income combined represent just over 3% of the total variance found.

These five factors predicted 32.3% of the variance related to a person's willingness to comment using new media tools (see table 4). The two behavior variables, traditional political communication ($\beta=.366$, $p<.05$) and political interaction ($\beta=.340$, $p<.05$). These findings show support for H4, which stated that those who comment

about news stories online are the respondents most likely to respond using traditional communication tools.

Based on the results of the various statistical tests it is not possible to identify a consistent relationship between all three of the variables. However, the adoption of interactive media tools may simply be a matter of time, with more people participating as time passes. Garrison noted "Adoption of new ideas, technologies, and practices requires time in any social system even a small and highly focused professional system such as journalism," (2001, p. 221). Information technology reaches critical mass representing widespread use much quicker in the interactive technologies associated with the Internet compared to traditional ones (Garrison, 2001).

The digital divide factors were investigated using a linear regression analysis. To avoid multicollinearity age, income, and education were separated from the behavioral variables and examined separately. The concern was that as Weaver and Drew (2001) showed behavioral factors such as political interaction and communication could create a sizable influence suppressing the potential significance of digital divide variables (see table 5). Removing this variable did not impact the results of age or income. The overall regression predicted 4.2% of the variance. However education did become significant ($\beta.197$, $p<.001$).

The digital divide must also be considered with certain segments of the population not having the skills to participate in online interaction. While the van Deursen and Dijk (2013) stated that those with lower incomes who have web access use the Internet more often they do so in a more superficial manner. However, the most prominent issue remains age in determining Internet use (van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2013). The older population may eventually be forced to adopt new technologies as even government entities transfer services online (Choudrie, Ghinea, & Songonuga, 2013). The most important barrier at this point to older people using the web is a lack of knowledge and/or skills (Choudrie, Ghinea, & Songonuga, 2013). This lack of knowledge and skills does not appear to be a long-term concern as digital technology becomes pervasive in society (Olphert & Damodaran, 2013). The results from this study indicated that amongst the three demographic variables age was the least related to someone's willingness to comment online. Therefore while age might have been a barrier at one time it now appears other factors such as income and education are better correlated to divisions in online access studied by the concept of the digital divide.

The results of this study appear to show that convergence is not limited to media companies. The public is also practicing convergence. Those who comment using one method seem willing or want to express their opinions in a number of different types of forums. There apparently is little consideration if that interaction occurs in person or online. Those who want to comment about politics seem to do so wherever they interact with others. Interactivity theory would appear to state that because the Internet is a superior method of communication for feedback and response more people should comment online (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1998). However, the results of this study indicate at this point that is not the case (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1998).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

After running the analysis of the data, there are a few relationships that appear to exist between the three variables. The first those who are willing to comment on politics seem to interact with people regardless of the form based upon the regression finding. Therefore people are more willing to comment through face-to-face, mail, or letters about political issues will also be willing to comment on news stories or on social media about politics. This means that even with new technology that makes interaction simpler there is a significant portion of the population that remains silent. One issue that must be addressed is the more than 1,000 respondents do not interact online at all with political communication. There are a number of potential motivations that appear to be necessary for people to participate in online commentary. These include building relationships, group attachment and expressing their identity (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003). Social connection is also a factor in if and how often people interact online (Ledbetter et al., 2010). The fact that people cannot control everything posted, i.e. the wall comments of others or other story comments, prevents some people from participating online (Ledbetter et al., 2010). There is also the issue of offline relationships influencing online ones because in solely online communities there are more people who will not participate, while in the more active communities it appears those involved have a traditional relationship as well (Matzat, 2010). Digital literacy also plays a role, because even if someone is online their willingness to become involved is impacted by his or her perceived level of digital literacy (Matzat, 2010).

Trends indicate more people are commenting online be through social media or commenting on news stories on media websites. Between 2009 and 2012 there were 6% more people who used the Internet and Internet usage has risen by 37% since 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2013). In terms of using the Internet to get news there are 43% more people accessing news online (Pew Research Center, 2013). Similarly there are 29% more people who use the Internet to get political news since 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2013). Finally the number of people who never use new media tools to discuss politics online has fallen by 9% between 2008 and 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2013). However, there is still more research needed in this area as the public transition to new media technology. Internet usage and social media appear likely to continue to increase in adoption rates.

Table 1. Use of traditional communication methods for political comments such as face-to-face, phone, or mail. N= 2,253

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never	Don't Know	Refused
Frequency	369	626	416	325	499	4	14
Percentage	16.4	27.8	18.5	14.4	22.1	.2	.6

Table 2. Use Online techniques to comment on politics N= 1,937

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than monthly	Never	Don't Know	Refused
Frequency	110	258	235	242	1090	0	2
Percentage	5.7	13.3	12.1	12.5	56.3	0	.1

Table 3. Spearman’s Rho correlations for age, traditional communication, online communication, income, education, and political interactivity

	Age	Traditional	Online	Income	Education	Political Activity
Age	1					
Traditional	.018	1				
Online	.039	.47**	1			
Income	.09**	.206**	.094**	1		
Education	.005	.328**	.200**	.356**	1	
Political Interactivity	.114* *	.288**	.424**	.117**	.035	1

Note: N = 2,253 for age and traditional, N = 1,937 for online

Potential responses for traditional and online were 1 = Every day, 2 = At least once a week, 3 = At least once a month, 4 = Less than once a month, 5 = never, 8 = don’t know, 9 = refused.

Potential income answers were 1 = Less than \$10,000, 2 = \$10,000 to under \$20,000, 3 = \$20,000 to under \$30,000, 4 = \$30,000 to under \$40,000, 5 = \$40,000 to under \$50,000, 6 = \$50,000 to under \$60,000, 7 = \$60,000 to under \$75,000, 8 = \$75,000 to under \$100,000, 9 = \$100,000 to under \$150,000, 10 = \$150,000 to under \$250,000, 11 = \$250,000 to under \$500,000, 12 = \$500,000 or more, 13 = don’t know or refused.

Education responses were 1 = None, or grades 1-8, 2 = High school incomplete (grades 9-11), 3 = High school graduate (grade 12 or GED certificate), 4 = Technical, trade or vocational school AFTER high school, 5 = Some college, no 4-year degree (includes associate degree), 6= College graduate (B.S., B.A., or other 4-year degree), 7 = Post-graduate training/professional school after college (toward a Masters/Ph.D., Law or Medical school), 8 = Don’t know, 9 = Refused.

* p < .05

** p < .01

Other results are not significant

Table 4. Regression comparing five variables to how likely someone is to comment on politics using new media tools. The independent variables were age, traditional communication tools and political interaction.

	Unstandardized B	SE	Beta
Age	.001	.002	.02
Income	-.003	.011	-.007
Education	-.022	.019	-.027
Traditional Political Communication **	.354	.022	.419
Political Interaction **	.523	.033	.340

R = .57, Adjusted R Square = .32, F = 154.40, d.f. 5, p < 01**

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Table 5. Regression comparing 3 variables to how likely someone is to comment on politics using new media tools. The independent variables were digital divide variables of age, income and education.

	Unstandardized B	SE	Beta
Age	.003	.002	.040
Income	-.043	.013	-.093
Education	-.122	.022	-.150**

R = .208, Adjusted R Square = .042, F = 25.125, d.f. 3, p < .001**

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