Social Media, Civic Awareness, and Political Engagement

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Overview of Presentation

- **Introduction**
  - Social Media and Civic Life Project
  - Prevalence of social media
- **Literature Review**
  - Existing research on social media and engagement
  - Literature gaps
- **Theory of social media effects on engagement**
  - Interaction about political issues through social media
  - Creating connections through social media
  - Mediated effects of social media on engagement (civic awareness)
- **Research Questions & Methods**
- **Findings**
  - Interaction about political issues through social media (2 slides)
  - Creating connections through social media (2 slides)
  - Social media, civic awareness, and engagement (2 slides)
- **Discussion** (2 slides)
- **Next steps** (5 slides)
Social Media and Civic Life Project

- Two-wave longitudinal survey
- 30 qualitative interviews of youth about how they use social media and civic and political activities
- 20 qualitative interviews of community organizations about their use of social media and recruitment practices
- Coding of Tweets and Facebook status updates (n=7000)
Prevalence of Social Media

- Facebook 10th Birthday: 1 Billion Active Users

- 95% of young adults used the Internet
  - 90% of online youth use social networking sites
    (Brenner & Smith, 2013; Eurostat, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2011; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012)

- If social media has any effects, these effects would be most evident among youth (those under 30 years)

Image source: http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-weS8EC69N5k/UIwVsVkF1-I/AAAAAAAABIE/V74n8AqqTas/s1600/19652684_ml.jpg
Existing Research

- Most of the research is correlational, based on a cross-section of the population or based on students.

- Most of the research finds a positive correlation.

- Most of the research is based on a specific political campaign, esp. 2008 and 2012 Presidential Elections.

Literature Gaps

a) Is the relationship causal or correlational?

b) What are the mechanisms through which social media affects political engagement?

c) Do the effects extend beyond a specific campaign?
Social Media and Engagement

- Interaction about political issues through social media

- Discuss any issue vs. news media’s agenda
  - Like blogs, but unlike blogs in reach/usage

- News Feeds about friends’ issues
  - Incidental exposure to political issues
Social Media and Engagement

- Creating connections through social media

- Connections to organizations, groups, & political actors
  - Facebook Group application as well as linking, following, friending, etc.
  - Exposure to messages about how to get involved (sign petition, boycott, volunteer, donate, etc.)

Image source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/27/2011_Egyptian_protests_Facebook_%26_jan25_card.jpg
Social Media and Engagement

- Mediated effects through civic awareness

- Social media builds awareness of what’s going on in the world, which affects engagement in a variety of political activities
Research Questions

- RQ1) How do youth use social media?
  - 30 qualitative interviews of youth recruited from agencies across the city

- RQ2) To what extent does social media use affect youth’s civic awareness?
  - Two-wave longitudinal survey
    - Wave 1: randomly selected students, stratified by gender (n=875)
    - Wave 2: re-surveyed these students and former students (n=500)

- RQ3) To what extent do these effects translate into increased political engagement?
Findings: Interaction about issues

- High levels of interaction about political issues through social media
- Higher levels than other studies have reported

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Percentages for 18–29 year olds, as reported by Rainie et al., (2012) n=323</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Like” or promote</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repost content</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post links to an issue</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post your own thoughts or comments on an issue</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>42%</td>
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Interviewer: What do you think of Facebook?

Sometimes it is great. Sometimes it is not so great. Some people they tend to update stuff that you don’t really want to know about. It allows you to post articles that you have read or videos. Sometimes you don’t want to see all those things and it is all over your News Feed.

A friend of mine the other day, she is very successful, works at the U of A, has her own successful blog, and she was like “oh I have 900 some odd followers” and you know. I even, when she retweets some of my posts, I’m like “that reached like 900 people! That’s amazing!”
# Findings: Creating connections

- Connections to community organizations very popular

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Other surveys of youth/students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a community organization, such as a charity</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a political group that is not affiliated with a party, such as an environmental organization</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>elected officials, candidates for office or other political figures</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a political party</td>
<td>13%</td>
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Findings: Creating connections

Interviewer: Are any of your friends on Facebook organizations or do you have any organizations added as friends on Facebook?

Yeah, most of the organizations are on Twitter though, like a lot of environment organizations and government organizations, or government like politicians I follow them.

Interviewer: Are some of your friends or your likes or whatever you follow, are some of them organizations? Any of them?

Some of them yes.

Interviewer: Which organizations?

So things like PETA, or Music for Change or peace groups, political groups …like that.
Findings: Correlations

- Prior engagement affects social media use, but the correlation is slightly larger from social media use to current engagement.

- Multivariate analysis (next slide) controls for:
  - Prior engagement
  - Prior digital messaging about political issues
  - Prior political interest
  - Demographics: gender, age, being a current student, mother’s education, and father’s education.
Findings: Mediated Effects

- Both types of social media use have a direct effect on political engagement, controlling for prior...

- Creating connections through social media has a significant **indirect** effect on political engagement through civic awareness.
Discussion

- Relationship between social media and engagement appears reciprocal, but there is a slightly larger effect from social media use to political engagement (mobilization)

  - Civic awareness is a key mechanism for explaining how social connections affect political engagement

  - Social media could address participation inequalities between young and old by addressing knowledge gaps
Discussion

- Generalizability
  - Students and former students vs. youth
  - Effects exist outside a specific campaign

Digital Messaging

- What do youth message about? How does digital messaging affect political interest and engagement?

Diagram:
- Received a digital message wave 1
- Political engagement wave 1
- Political interest wave 1
- Received a digital message wave 2
- Political engagement wave 2
- Political interest wave 2
How does news via social media compare to other news media in building civic awareness?

*Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2013
#ANES 2008-9 Panel Measures
Stimulating News

- What online news sources do youth consume? What topics do they follow? To what degree does online news stimulate interest and engagement among youth?
Civic Peers

Interviewer: What made you decide to friend or like those organizations?

Usually my friends would be part of them, so they will be, like, send me something, “Hey, like this! I’m part of this organization.” So I’ll instantly “like” it and I’ll read into it. Sometimes I will get involved in it, sometimes I won’t.

Survey Data:
- Network size (online, offline)
- Group membership
- Do your friends... volunteer? Donate? Vote?
- Have you ever used social networking sites to encourage other people to... volunteer? Donate? Vote?
- Have you ever received messages from friends or groups asking you to... volunteer? Donate? Vote?
Nonprofits and Social Media

- Qualitative interviews from organizations about how they use social media
- Qualitative interviews from youth about messages they receive through social media from organizations

Content Analysis of SMS posts (n=7000)
- % of posts that are about volunteer recruitment
- % of posts that are about showcasing the work of volunteers
- % of posts about statistics or other info. about volunteering