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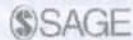
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What is This?

MyFaceTube Politics

Social Networking Web Sites and Political Engagement of Young Adults

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This article examines the political uses of social networking (SN) Web sites by young adults in context of the early stages of the 2008 presidential primary season. Using a survey of over 3,500 18- to 24-year-olds contacted immediately prior to the Iowa caucuses, we illustrate that although SN Web sites are recognized by youth as a possible source of news and that many receive some of their news from these sites, the types of news gathered probably do little to inform them or add to democratic discourse. Moreover, the study shows that in spite of the promise SN sites hold for increasing political interest and participation among a chronically disengaged cohort, users are no more inclined to participate in politics than are users of other media.

Keywords: *social networking; youth and politics; 2008 presidential primaries; political engagement*

Introduction

There is little question that by conventional measures young adults are more disengaged from politics than their older counterparts (Bauerlein, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Wattenberg, 2007). Youth are less likely to participate in politics by voting, contributing money, volunteering time, or showing up to a protest rally than are older Americans. The media habits of youth are also different than those of older citizens. They are much less likely than their older counterparts to read a daily newspaper, tune in to traditional evening television news broadcasts, or listen to news on the radio.

It is the Internet, however, that has most dramatically redefined young adults' methods of learning about and participating in politics. Because the Internet has evolved so rapidly, there has been little attention paid to the way in which youth are using social networking (SN) sites, such as Facebook.com, MySpace.com, and YouTube.com, to engage in politics. Such sites allow individual users to post information and interact with others either one-on-one or in groups. While considered "new technology" to many, SN sites are already

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conventional communications venues for young adults. Most have a SN account and make heavy use of them (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Do young adults make use of these sites to learn about and engage in political activity? The question is important because SN sites offer an opportunity to an age cohort that has been chronically disengaged and disconnected from politics to become involved in politics on their own terms. Young adults that may not be interested in politics can get political information through their online network of friends and acquaintances, and this may generate greater political interest. Alternatively, greater interest may be generated by the sense of virtual community that can develop on these sites around a political idea or leader.

This study examines the relationship between SN Web site usage and political engagement, broadly defined, among young adults, within the context of the early stages of the 2008 presidential primary races. We rely on a survey of over 3,500 18- to 24-year-olds in which the participants were contacted immediately prior to the Iowa caucuses. We find that SN Web sites are widely recognized by young adults as one of several possible sources of political news, and that many receive at least some of their news from these sites. Ultimately, however, we find little evidence to suggest that SN Web sites have facilitated significantly greater political knowledge, engagement, or participation.

Our analysis suggests that many young adults who use SN Web sites for news prefer information that conforms to their preexisting political views. Although SN Web site users were slightly more knowledgeable about the field of presidential candidates than nonusers, their knowledge did not appear to extend to the political world in general. In addition, although SN news users were more likely to engage in Internet-based political activity (blogging, forwarding a political e-mail), they were not more likely to participate in more conventional political activities, such as voting. Our findings call into question the notion that the Internet may revolutionize political engagement among a new generation of citizens.

The Internet, Young Adults, and Political Engagement

The fact that young adults are not politically engaged has been well documented. For example, youth voter turnout rates dropped by 15 percentage points from 1972 to 2000 (Baumgartner & Francia, 2008). A modest uptick in voting among young people in 2004 and 2008 (Curry, 2008) was offset by increased turnout among all groups, mitigating the relative voting power of the youth block. Recent research has suggested that a fundamental shift is occurring among young adults in which political engagement is increasingly de-emphasized and nonpolitical public service has become more socially and culturally ingrained (Dalton, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Today's young adults are not necessarily shiftless, hapless, self-indulgent narcissists; they do seem to care about others and their community. However, this concern apparently does not extend to politics.

The Internet has been touted as a channel through which youth may become mobilized into politics and public affairs, but evidence in this regard is mixed. For example, some scholars suggest that Internet usage has a positive effect on social engagement (Robinson, Kestnbaum, Neustadt, & Alvarez, 2000; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001), whereas others suggest the opposite (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001). Another group suggests that the Internet may stimulate political participation (Bucy & Gregson, 2001; Corrado, 1996; Grossman, 1999;

Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Whillock, 1997), but this argument too has its detractors (Davis, 1999; Davis & Owen, 1998; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

Of course, it is misleading to discuss “the Internet” as a single entity. Patterns of use vary dramatically, particularly among young adults. This point is particularly relevant to our research. The vast majority of existing research on the Internet and political engagement treat exposure to the Internet as unidimensional (Shah et al., 2005). However, simply tracking the amount of time an individual spends online is a blunt and archaic measure; this is especially true when examining the Internet habits of young adults.

As noted, our interest is in a relatively new segment of the Internet—SN Web sites. More specifically, we are interested in (a) whether or not users of these sites collect news and information from them; (b) if so, what kinds; and (c) how this information might affect their overall political knowledge, interest, and participation. Some earlier research has suggested preliminary answers to these questions. Most notably, Davis (2005) examined the potential of online blogs, chatrooms, and discussion groups to stimulate democratic discourse. His findings were less than encouraging. He found the deliberative nature of electronic talk lacking, noting that blogs and discussion groups are typically dominated by atypical partisans and ideologues. He concluded that “characteristics of [online] discussion—exclusion of others, flaming, a great deal of anonymity” make it “problematic as a public discussion forum” (Davis, 2005, p. 119).

Davis examined blogs, chatrooms, and discussion groups, which, although distinctly different, might be thought of as precursors to SN Web sites. There is little research that examines the nexus between politics and this new permutation of Internet “talk.” One recent study (Williams & Gulati, 2007) examined Facebook.com and MySpace.com during the 2006 midterm elections, finding that the level of enthusiasm for a political candidate on Facebook.com was generally reflective of overall enthusiasm for a candidate. And, although the authors argue that a higher number of “supporters” on Facebook.com led to a higher share of the vote, causal evidence of this was lacking. Gueorguieva (2008) examined the use of YouTube.com and MySpace.com during the presidential primaries by candidate campaigns and SN users, but the data are descriptive and the discussion speculative.

We are aware of no empirical research that has addressed the question of how SN Web site usage might be correlated with political engagement. Given the potential of Internet innovations to contribute to democratic discourse and participation, this area is clearly in need of theoretical and empirical examination.

Our contention is that uses and gratification theory offers an excellent starting point for understanding how SN Web sites may influence political engagement relative to other media sources. According to this school of thought, individual motives for media usage vary (Swanson, 1987; Zillman, 1985; Zillman & Bryant, 1985), and regular patterns of news and information consumption have been found to be generally fulfilling for Americans (Graber, 2006). People regularly pursue news and information that they personally consider enjoyable and useful (Graber, 2001, 2006; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Popkin, 1994; Rosenberg, 1988).

Uses and gratification theory has also been extended to Internet usage (Norris & Jones, 1998; Shah et al., 2005). The motivations of Internet users are, of course, not monolithic. Individuals can seek information, look to buy goods and services, to express opinions, to

be entertained, or simply stay connected with friends and acquaintances. These motives are not mutually exclusive, but recent exploratory studies on the behavior of SN Web site users suggest that they generally wish to be entertained and stay connected to others. Boyd (2008) notes that:

Typical SNS (social networking site) participants are more invested in adding glitter to pages and SuperPoking their "friends" than engaging in any form of civic-minded collective action . . . Most people are simply logging in to hang out with friends that they already know . . . [P]eople pay attention to what interests them. Not surprisingly, offline or online, gossiping is far more common and interesting than voting (pp. 112-115).

Boyd goes on to make an even more relevant observation of how multiuser Internet sites have evolved in the recent years:

Over the last decade, the dominant networked publics have shifted from being topically organized to being structured around personal networks. Most users no longer seek . . . to discuss particular topics with strangers. Instead, they are hanging out online with people that they already know. SNSes are explicitly designed to be about "me and my friends." . . . People are exposed to the things that their friends choose to share . . . Just as politically engaged people know one another, alienated and uninterested people mainly know people like themselves (p. 115).

From a uses and gratifications perspective, the political implications of Boyd's comments are clear: News consumption and/or political engagement are not motivations that drive most SN users. As is the case with traditional media, those that use the Internet to seek out political information are likely to be already somewhat more knowledgeable and engaged (Lin, Salwen, & Abdulla, 2005). However, SN Web site users find gratification in SN; political engagement is at best an ancillary interest. This said, questions remain. If a young adult signs up as Barack Obama's or John McCain's "friend," and so on, could we expect this to lead to higher levels of political knowledge, interest, and involvement?

There is a school of thought among political scientists and communication scholars that suggests we might. These researchers have focused on entertainment-based programming that contains small amounts of news (political or otherwise), also known as "soft news." They suggest that soft news contributes to democratic discourse by providing political information to individuals who might otherwise not be inclined to follow news (see Baum, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Baum & Jamison, 2006). They note the high opportunity costs associated with following traditional news (a.k.a., "hard news") and the fact that many do not wish to expend the time and effort necessary to stay informed. Soft news, however, offers greater expected benefits for consumers by offering higher levels of entertainment. This combination of entertainment and news contributes to making otherwise-disengaged Americans more aware of the political world. Political learning occurs as an "incidental by-product" of seeking entertainment (Baum, 2003a, p. 7).

We suggest that inasmuch as SN Web sites can be considered news or information sources, they are *soft news* sources. Certainly, the bulk of SN Web site users appear to share similar characteristics as the soft news audience. First, young adults who are SN Web site users, like soft news users, tend to be less interested in politics than those who regularly use hard news (Boyd, 2008). Second, SN Web site users are not necessarily seeking information

about public affairs when they log on to these sites. However, some amount of political news and information can be found on these sites. Candidates, parties, and interest groups have a presence on Facebook and MySpace, and they are increasingly making use of YouTube as well. Links to clips on YouTube abound on the Internet, and messages originating from a multitude of Facebook and MySpace pages circulate virally across social networks.

From the perspective of Matt Baum and other proponents of the benefits of soft news, one could argue that SN Web sites might contribute to democratic discourse by providing information about politics and current events to otherwise-disengaged individuals. Exposure to soft news among the disengaged public offers a starting point, or "gateway" into higher levels of political engagement. The more an individual learns incidentally about politics via soft news media, the more likely they are to participate in the future via more conventional means (Baum, 2003a, pp. 111-112).

However, we see several potential problems in applying Baum's incidental by-product learning model and gateway hypothesis to the use of SN Web sites. First and foremost, as Boyd noted, young adults seem to use SN Web sites to connect online with like-minded individuals. Political information will only penetrate the online social networks of those who share an interest in politics, and not many young adults who frequent these sites seem politically inclined. In online communities that share little-to-no interest in politics, the potential for information to penetrate is limited. Thus, the potential for incidental learning is minimized.

Second, young adults are particularly skilled at navigating the information environment (see Calavita, 2005; Twenge, 2006). Not only do they know how to locate specific content on the Internet, they are also skilled at avoiding content they deem undesirable. Recent research has found that this is a growing tendency among all Americans (see Prior, 2005; Sunstein, 2001), but it appears particularly evident among young adults (Bauerlein, 2008). As the number of media options increase, the disinterested and disengaged have greater ability to avoid news and information and *stay* disinterested and disengaged. As Prior (2005) noted:

Today, as both entertainment and news are available around the clock on numerous cable channels and Web sites, people's content preferences determine more of what those with cable or Internet access watch, read, and hear (p. 577).

Although the possibility for incidental learning on SN Web sites exists, we agree with Prior and Sunstein's contention that today's media environment empowers people, particularly young adults, to avoid content they deem undesirable. Certainly, the democratic potential of online SN Web sites cannot be denied, but we question whether it has been realized. The following analysis based on a survey of several thousand young adults and their media habits during the early stages of the 2008 presidential primary season mostly confirms our expectations. We examine the effects of SN Web site usage on political engagement, including news and information gathering habits, political knowledge, and political participation, on young adults.

Data

Data were collected from a Web survey of college students in December 2007. The logic for the timing was that by this stage of the presidential campaign many are starting

to pay attention to the field of presidential contenders (Pew Research Center, 2007). To obtain our sample, we selected 350 public universities from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. We then sent the registrar of each university a letter requesting a directory of undergraduate student e-mail addresses. We included a description of the research, a copy of the survey, and the institutional review board approval from our university. We received directories from institutions in 48 different states and the District of Columbia.

Throughout 2007 we sent e-mails to these undergraduate students inviting them to participate in the study. The invitation e-mail contained the words, "American Values Survey, 2007-08," in the subject line. A brief introductory paragraph asked students to participate in research we were conducting about the political attitudes and behavior of college students. We informed them that their participation was voluntary and that surveys would take from 10–20 min.

This sampling strategy has several advantages that answer common concerns about external validity. First, although our participants are college students, this age group corresponds to the target population (18- to 24-year-old youth). Thus, the results of the research are more generalizable than are many studies of college students (Sears, 1986). A second advantage is that this particular age group is becoming increasingly difficult to contact via telephone (Pew Research Center, 2006). Of those who responded to the survey, only about one quarter have traditional landline telephones in the residence where they live, meaning that a traditional telephone survey would likely reach a nonrepresentative sample. Finally, the sample was drawn from public universities located in all regions of the country and, as such, is fairly representative of the larger population of university students.

In mid-December, we pretested the first survey with 500 individuals. In addition to taking the survey, respondents were asked to make note of how long it took them to complete the survey, whether they had any trouble understanding questions or navigating the survey, and so on. After verifying that the survey could be completed in less than 20 minutes and making a few minor adjustments, e-mails to the entire sample were sent on December 15, 2007; reminders were sent on December 19 and 21, 2007. The survey was closed on December 23, 2007, resulting in a response rate of 37.9%.

The SN Web Site Factor

The first step in the analysis was to determine whether SN Web sites are used by young adults as sources of political news, and if so, if they are viewed as a unique form of news. Our evidence suggests this is the case. Young adults use SN Web sites as a source of news and view them as a distinct form of news source.

Overall, the vast majority of young adults in our sample have SN accounts on the Internet. In all, 88% of our sample reported that they had created a personal profile on a SN Web site such as Facebook.com or MySpace.com. This fits fairly well with data from a Pew Research Center survey in late 2007, which found that 77% of adults aged 18–24 years use SN Web sites (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Does usage of SN Web sites translate into news gathering? Table 1 outlines the media habits of our sample. Overall, the Internet (as a whole) is the most frequently used news

Table 1
Young Adults' Media Habits

| During a typical week, can you tell us how many days you . . . | 1-2 Days per Week (%) | 3 or More Days per Week (%) |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Get news from YouTube.com | 11 | 6 |
| Get news from social networking sites | 22 | 26 |
| Watch <i>The Daily Show with Jon Stewart</i> | 21 | 23 |
| Watch <i>The Colbert Report</i> | 21 | 25 |
| Watch <i>The Tonight Show with Jay Leno</i> | 20 | 9 |
| Watch <i>Late Show with David Letterman</i> | 16 | 7 |
| Watch <i>Late Night with Conan O'Brien</i> | 17 | 10 |
| Watch news on CNN | 35 | 23 |
| Watch news on Fox News cable channel | 32 | 22 |
| Watch news on MSNBC | 31 | 17 |
| Listen to news on the radio | 18 | 31 |
| Watch or read news on the Internet | 23 | 69 |
| Read news in a printed newspaper | 40 | 34 |
| Read news in your cell phone or PDA | 2 | 2 |
| Watch prerecorded news on a TiVo or digital video recorder (DVR) | 3 | 2 |
| Get news on an iPod or digital music player | 2 | 2 |

source. Almost 70% of the sample uses the Internet for news at least three times a week, and only 8% of the sample does not use the Internet at all for news. The use of SN sites for news is frequent as well. Notably, almost half (48%) of our sample get news from SN sites at least once a week. This usage compares favorably to other sources of news, including cable news and traditional media. Reliance on YouTube.com for news is less frequent, with only 17% of the sample reporting that they get news from that site at least once a week. Data from Pew Research Center support these findings as well. In late 2007, Pew found that 32% of SN Web site users had received information about the presidential primaries from those sites. When the analysis is run on the adults in the sample who were under 25 years old, however, this percentage jumps to 49% (Pew Research Center, 2008).

Having established that young adults use SN Web sites to get news, we were interested to see whether or not they viewed these sites as a unique source of news, or simply part of the broader news universe. To understand how young adults view SN Web sites as a news source relative to the other sources listed in Table 1, we conducted a factor analysis that included each source of news. This allowed us to evaluate whether or not young adults view news sources along similar or unique dimensions (Davis & Owen, 1998). Table 2 shows the results of a principal components analysis of several sources of news (varimax rotation). Six significant dimensions emerge (Eigenvalue > 1.0).

Overall, the presence of so many dimensions of news in Table 2 illustrates that the multitude of news options available to young adults are recognized and differentiated as such by users. Two unique factors of "humor-based" media emerge, along with a cable news and a "traditional" factor. It is also noteworthy that "reading the news on the Internet" falls in the "traditional news" factor, along with reading print newspapers and listening to the news on

Table 2
Factor Analysis of News Sources

| | Social Networking | Cable Humor | Network Humor | Cable News | Traditional News | iPod/ Podcast |
|--|----------------------|----------------|------------------|---------------|---------------------|------------------|
| YouTube.com | .79 | | | | | |
| Social networking sites | .73 | | | | | |
| <i>The Daily Show with Jon Stewart</i> | | .94 | | | | |
| <i>The Colbert Report</i> | | .93 | | | | |
| <i>The Tonight Show with Jay Leno</i> | | | .84 | | | |
| <i>Late Show with David Letterman</i> | | | .74 | | | |
| <i>Late Night with Conan O'Brien</i> | | | .79 | | | |
| CNN | | | | .72 | | |
| Fox News cable channel | | | | .70 | | |
| MSNBC | | | | .75 | | |
| News radio | | | | | .69 | |
| Internet | | | | | .67 | |
| Printed newspaper | | | | | .64 | |
| Cell phone or PDA | | | | | | .61 |
| News on a TiVo or DVR | | | | | | .59 |
| iPod or digital music player | | | | | | .73 |
| Eigenvalue | 1.04 | 3.58 | 1.69 | 1.56 | 1.34 | 1.08 |

Note: Cell entries are rotated principal components factor loadings (>.40). Loadings less than .40 were excluded (Varimax Rotation).

the radio. This illustrates that for young adults not all Internet news sources are the same, and, further, that reading news on the Internet is viewed by them as a "traditional" form of news gathering. Unlike previous generations, the current cohort of young adults never knew a world without the Internet. For them, reading news on the Internet is little different than reading a newspaper that is delivered to the front door.

Most importantly, we see that a unique SN dimension of news emerges from the factor analysis. Not only does the Facebook.com and MySpace.com variable load on this factor, but the YouTube.com variable does as well. This illustrates that recognition of these types of sites as a unique source of news is not happenstance among young adults. Furthermore, it is important to note that the SN dimension is unique from other "new" digital sources of news. The Internet as a whole falls in the "traditional" dimension, and the use of personal digital devices, such as iPod "podcasts," news on cell phones, and DVR fall on a unique dimension as well.

Having established that SN Web sites are a unique source of news used by young adults, we turn to a discussion of how exposure to this form of news is associated with political engagement. This discussion includes an examination of how the use of SN Web sites is related to news preference, political knowledge, and political participation. We begin first with a discussion of news preferences of SN Web site users. What types of news are young adults looking for on SN sites?

Table 3
News Preference by Media Exposure

| Enjoys News That: | Concerns | | | | |
|-------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| | Shares Preexisting Point of View | Offers Competing Points of View | Political Figures and Events in Washington | Concerns International Affairs | Concerns Entertainment |
| Variable | | | | | |
| Media exposure | | | | | |
| Social networking | .16 (.08)** | -.04 (-.02) | .16 (.06)** | .16 (.06)** | .53 (.19)** |
| Cable humor | .04 (.02) | .17 (.08)** | .43 (.16)** | .43 (.16)** | -.10 (-.04)* |
| Network humor | .04 (.02) | -.13 (-.06)** | -.10 (.04)** | .04 (.01) | .58 (.21)** |
| Cable news | .20 (.10)** | .02 (.01) | .69 (.26)** | .56 (.21)** | .49 (.18)** |
| Traditional news | .04 (.02) | .22 (.10)** | .79 (.30)** | .83 (.31)** | .08 (.03) |
| Podcasts | -.06 (-.03) | -.02 (-.01) | .18 (.07)** | .10 (.04)** | -.07 (-.02) |
| Controls | | | | | |
| Age | .02 (.02) | .07 (.05) | .01 (.01) | -.01 (-.01) | -.00 (-.00) |
| Race | .24 (.04)* | -.16 (-.03) | .26 (.03)** | -.32 (-.04)** | -.30 (-.04)* |
| Education | -.10 (-.06)* | -.01 (-.01) | -.01 (-.00) | .07 (.04) | -.04 (-.01) |
| Gender | -.06 (-.01) | .06 (.01) | .34 (.06)** | .60 (.11)** | -1.08 (-.18)** |
| Knowledge | .17 (.10)** | .24 (.14)** | .72 (.34)** | .59 (.28)** | -.13 (-.06)** |
| Ideology | .03 (.01) | -.16 (-.07)** | -.03 (-.01) | -.16 (-.06)** | -.00 (-.00) |
| Party ID | .08 (.04) | .05 (.02) | -.09 (-.03) | .02 (-.01) | -.12 (-.04)* |
| Constant | 4.61** | 5.62** | 2.36** | 3.67** | 6.54** |
| Adjusted R ² | .04 | .07 | .44 | .38 | .17 |
| N | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 |

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses. See appendix for coding.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

SN and News Preference

Table 3 shows the results of an analysis in which preference of news is regressed (using ordinary least squares regression) against several predictors. We were especially interested in seeing the relationship between SN Web site usage and consumption of news and information that represented differing points of view and news about public affairs. We control for demographic factors (age, race, education, gender) as well as political knowledge and attitudinal variables (ideological orientation and partisan identification). The cell entries are the unstandardized coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses (see appendix for question wording and coding). To measure exposure to various media sources, we saved the rotated factor scores from the principal components analysis discussed in the previous section. Higher values represent higher levels of exposure to the media sources that load on that dimension.

The analysis presented in Table 3 offers a preliminary understanding of the type of news young SN Web site users are seeking. There is a significant positive relationship between SN Web site news usage and enjoyment of news that shares the individual's preexisting point of view (first column of estimates). Only the cable news audience illustrates a similar pattern of preferring like-minded news. The table also shows that the desire for news with competing points of view is not prevalent among SN Web site news consumers. The

coefficient is negative, but not statistically significant. This trend among SN Web site users may contribute to greater communication among like-minded individuals, but would do little to stimulate debate or discourse among those with competing ideas.

When it comes to interest in news about political issues, SN Web site news users are significantly more interested in news that covers political figures and events in Washington as well as news that covers international affairs. However, when compared with usage of the other dimensions of news, particularly cable news and traditional news, the impact of the SN factor is fairly modest in both models (see standardized coefficients).

The relative impact of the SN variable is much stronger in the final model ("attention to news that covers entertainment"). In this model, only the network humor (Leno, Letterman, O'Brien) factor has a larger relative impact than the SN Web site factor. Those who use traditional news more frequently, however, were not more likely to follow news about entertainment, and increased reliance on cable humor was actually negatively associated with interest in entertainment news. This finding conforms to Boyd's (2008) description of the motivation of SN Web site users.

Ultimately, the findings displayed in Table 3 illustrate that SN Web site news consumers follow news about public affairs, but to a limited extent relative to other types of news, and are not particularly interested in pursuing diverse sources of news and/or ideas. These Web sites offer the opportunity to participate in and stimulate political discourse, but we see little evidence that users capitalize on that opportunity.

SN and Political Knowledge

Past research has found that some "new" media consumers believe they are more politically knowledgeable than they actually are (Hollander, 1995). To test the knowledge of SN news users as opposed to users of other sources of news, we present a series of logistic regressions in Table 4 in which five different measures of political knowledge were regressed on our media factor scores as well as the control variables. In each column, the dependent variable is whether or not a respondent answered a given question correctly (1 = correct answer; 0 = incorrect answer or "don't know").

As Table 4 demonstrates, several media factors are positively correlated with the ability to answer the political knowledge questions correctly. Overall, it appears that cable news users, traditional media users, and cable humor viewers are the most knowledgeable. The SN factor, however, was statistically significant in only one of the five knowledge questions (recognition of the Speaker of the House). Even in this one case, a comparison of standardized coefficients across the other media factors shows that the relative impact of the SN variable is small compared with cable humor, cable news, and traditional news.

The measures of political knowledge in Table 4 are measures of generalized civics knowledge and illustrate the relative insignificance of the SN factor compared with other media factors. To offer a more accurate test of knowledge of current issues, we included additional questions that measured knowledge of the field of presidential primary candidates. Respondents were asked to identify which candidate fit a description that had been widely discussed in the media. Specifically, respondents were asked which candidate was a practicing Mormon, the former mayor of New York City, a

Table 4
Political Knowledge by Media Exposure

| | Speaker of the House | Majority Party in Congress | Chief Justice of Supreme Court | Political Party That is More Conservative | Proportion of Vote Necessary to Override Presidential Veto |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Media exposure | | | | | |
| Social networking | .08 (.05)* | .03 (.02) | .08 (.04) | .01 (.01) | -.05 (-.03) |
| Cable humor | .42 (.23)** | .37 (.20)** | .19 (.10)** | .42 (.23)** | .13 (.07)* |
| Network humor | .02 (.01) | -.08 (-.04)* | -.05 (-.03) | -.18 (-.10)** | -.03 (-.01) |
| Cable news | .27 (.15)** | .15 (.08)** | .12 (.07)** | .00 (.00) | .02 (.01) |
| Traditional news | .52 (.29)** | .40 (.22)** | .45 (.25)** | .26 (.14)** | .19 (.11)** |
| Podcasts | .00 (.00) | -.00 (-.00) | .01 (.00) | -.14 (-.07)** | .03 (.02) |
| Controls | | | | | |
| Age | -.03 (-.02) | -.00 (-.00) | -.09 (-.08) | -.13 (-.12)* | -.09 (-.08) |
| Race | .08 (.01) | .03 (.01) | .02 (.00) | .48 (.09)** | .18 (.03) |
| Education | .02 (.01) | .05 (.04) | .13 (.10)* | .28 (.20)** | .04 (.03) |
| Gender | .43 (.11)** | .87 (.22)** | .74 (.19)** | -.21 (-.05) | .72 (.18)** |
| Ideology | .02 (.01) | .00 (.00) | -.06 (-.03) | -.04 (-.02) | -.07 (-.04) |
| Party ID | -.07 (-.03) | -.10 (-.05) | .05 (.02) | .07 (.04) | .01 (.01) |
| Constant | .70 | -.19 | -.79 | 3.61** | 2.96** |
| Pseudo R^2 | .09 | .09 | .07 | .05 | .03 |
| <i>N</i> | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 |

Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses. Standardized coefficients were calculated using "lstand" postestimation for the "logistic" command in Stata 9.2, defined as $(B*SD)/\sqrt{\pi^2/3}$. See appendix for coding.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

senator from New York, a first-term senator from Illinois, and a prisoner of war (POW) during the Vietnam War. In the estimates presented in Table 5, the cable humor factor, the traditional news factor, and, to some lesser degree, the cable news factor are most significantly associated with greater knowledge of the field of candidates (see standardized coefficients in parentheses).

Unlike the mostly null findings on the relationship between SN Web site news consumption and general political knowledge outlined in Table 4, the SN factor is statistically significant and positively associated with knowledge on three of the five items ($p \leq .05$). Again, however, a comparison of the standardized coefficients illustrates that the relative impact of the SN factor is small in comparison to the cable humor, cable news, and traditional news factors.

Based on the findings in Tables 4 and 5, there is little evidence to suggest individuals who get their news about politics on SN Web sites are well informed. The SN factor was positively associated with knowledge of candidates in some instances and was significant in only one of five measures of general political knowledge. In addition, when compared with other media exposure factors, the impact of the SN factor was relatively weak. Thus, there is little reason to suspect that SN Web site news consumers are learning much about public affairs from these sites.

Table 5
Knowledge of Presidential Primary Candidates by Media Exposure

| | Is a Practicing Mormon | Is Former Mayor of New York City | Is a Senator From New York State | Is a First-Term Senator From Illinois | Was POW During Vietnam War |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Media exposure | | | | | |
| Social networking | .08 (.05)* | .17 (.10)** | .03 (.02) | .08 (.04)* | -.01 (-.00) |
| Cable humor | .37 (.21)** | .65 (.36)** | .39 (.22)** | .37 (.20)** | .42 (.23)** |
| Network humor | -.02 (-.01) | .08 (.04) | -.05 (-.03) | .00 (.00) | .08 (.05)* |
| Cable news | .18 (.10)** | .13 (.07)* | .14 (.08)** | .20 (.11)** | .19 (.10)** |
| Traditional news | .52 (.29)** | .48 (.26)** | .45 (.25)** | .50 (.27)** | .41 (.22)** |
| Podcasts | .02 (.01) | -.00 (-.00) | -.05 (-.03) | -.01 (-.00) | .03 (.02) |
| Controls | | | | | |
| Age | .05 (.04) | .13 (.12)* | .13 (.11)** | .09 (.08)* | .10 (.09)** |
| Race | .23 (.04)* | .41 (.08)** | .25 (.05)* | -.04 (-.01) | .47 (.09)** |
| Education | .08 (.06) | .12 (.08) | .12 (.09)* | .04 (.03) | .05 (.04) |
| Gender | .60 (.15)** | .72 (.18)** | .29 (.07)** | .59 (.15)** | 1.06 (.27)** |
| Ideology | .03 (.02) | -.14 (-.08) | .00 (.00) | .07 (.04) | -.00 (-.00) |
| Party ID | .02 (.01) | .06 (.03) | -.00 (-.00) | -.12 (-.06)* | .07 (.03) |
| Constant | 1.86** | -.97 | -1.69 | -1.52* | -3.11** |
| Pseudo R^2 | .10 | .11 | .08 | .10 | .12 |
| <i>N</i> | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 | 3,531 |

Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses. Standardized coefficients were calculated using "lstand" postestimation for the "logistic" command in Stata 9.2, defined as $(B*SD)/\sqrt{\pi^2/3}$. See appendix for coding.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

SN and Political Participation

In this section, we examine how SN Web site news users participate in politics. To measure political participation, we presented respondents a list of political activities and asked them to indicate whether they had engaged in each within the past 12 months. Table 6 shows the results from a series of logistic regressions in which participation in each of these activities is estimated as a function of our predictors. The activities are divided into two categories, Internet and non-Internet activities. The former includes whether or not an individual posted a message on a blog, signed an e-mail or Web petition, or forwarded a political e-mail or link to another person in the last 12 months.

As the results show, the majority of the media factors are positively associated with the tendency to have engaged in each of these three Internet activities. The network humor factor is the only factor that is not significantly related to Internet activities. The SN Web site factor is significantly and positively associated with Internet activity for each dependent variable. It is noteworthy that the relative impact of the SN variable rivals that of the other media factors, although the traditional news variable is consistently stronger.

The last four columns of Table 6 are estimates of non-Internet political activity, which includes writing or calling a politician, writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper or

Table 6
Political Participation by Media Exposure

| Variable | Did respondent participate in given activity in last 12 months? (1=yes; 0=no) | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|---|
| | Internet activities | | | Non-Internet activities | | | |
| | Posted message on blog expressing political opinion | Signed a email or web petition | Forwarded political email or link | Written or called a politician | Written letter to newspaper or called TV or radio show to express opinion | Signed a written petition | Not purchased a product to protest the maker(s) of it |
| <i>Media Exposure</i> | | | | | | | |
| Social Networking | .39 (.21)** | .15 (.08)** | .26 (.15)** | .03 (.02) | .13 (.07) | .06 (.04) | .02 (.01) |
| Cable Humor | .28 (.15)** | .15 (.08)** | .16 (.09)** | .18 (.10)** | .07 (.04) | .06 (.04) | .21 (.12)** |
| Network Humor | .07 (.04) | -.05 (-.03) | .04 (.02) | -.08 (-.04) | -.10 (-.05) | -.04 (-.02) | -.09 (-.05)* |
| Cable News | .23 (.13)** | .07 (.04) | .21 (.12)** | .01 (.00) | .25 (.14)** | .08 (.04) | .03 (.02) |
| Traditional News | .48 (.26)** | .23 (.13)** | .47 (.26)** | .35 (.20)** | .62 (.34)** | .25 (.14)** | .28 (.16)** |
| Podcasts | .09 (.05) | .10 (.05) | .14 (.08)** | .10 (.05) | .20 (.11)** | .09 (.05)** | .03 (.01) |
| <i>Controls</i> | | | | | | | |
| Age | .05 (.04) | .10 (.09)* | .09 (.08) | .12 (.11)* | .05 (.05) | -.03 (-.03) | .09 (.08)* |
| Race | .08 (.01) | -.18 (-.03) | .21 (.04) | .34 (.06)* | .61 (.11)* | -.13 (-.02) | .26 (.05) |
| Education | -.05 (-.04) | -.01 (-.00) | .03 (.02) | -.02 (-.01) | -.01 (-.01) | .04 (.03) | .00 (.00) |
| Gender | .06 (.02) | -.19 (-.05) | -.27 (-.07)** | -.05 (-.01) | .35 (.09) | -.10 (-.03) | -.33 (-.08)** |
| Knowledge | .31 (.21)** | .27 (.18)** | .30 (.20)** | .32 (.22)** | .34 (.23)** | .15 (.10)** | .23 (.16)** |
| Ideology | -.26 (-.14)** | -.36 (-.20)** | -.25 (-.13)** | -.10 (-.05) | -.24 (-.13)* | -.17 (-.09)** | -.35 (-.19)** |
| Party ID | .07 (.04) | -.01 (-.01) | .21 (.11)** | .14 (-.07) | -.07 (-.04) | -.17 (-.09)** | .08 (.04) |
| Constant | -3.07** | -2.58** | -4.41** | -4.98** | -5.30** | .02 | -2.47** |
| Pseudo R ² | .13 | .08 | .11 | .08 | .13 | .04 | .07 |
| N | 3531 | 3531 | 3531 | 3531 | 3531 | 3531 | 3531 |

Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses. Standardized coefficients were calculated using "stand" post-estimation for the "logistic" command in Stata 9.2, defined as (B*SD)/sqrt(pi^2/3). See Appendix for coding.
* p<.05, ** p<.01 (two-tailed)

Table 7
Voting Tendency by Media Exposure

| Variable | Voted in 2006 Midterm Elections (1 = Yes; 0 = No) | Likely to Vote in 2008 Presidential Election (1 = Likely; 0 = Not Likely) |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Media exposure | | |
| Social networking | .04 (.02) | .07 (.04) |
| Cable humor | .02 (.01) | .26 (.14)** |
| Network humor | .08 (.04) | .07 (.04) |
| Cable news | .13 (.07)** | .20 (.11)* |
| Traditional news | .24 (.13)** | .42 (.23)* |
| Podcasts | .13 (.07)** | .07 (.04) |
| Controls | | |
| Age | .10 (.09)* | -.01 (-.01) |
| Race | .31 (.06)* | .89 (.17)** |
| Education | -.12 (-.09)* | .05 (.03) |
| Gender | .01 (.00) | -.60 (-.15)** |
| Knowledge | .39 (.26)** | .57 (.39)** |
| Ideology | .06 (.03) | .15 (.08) |
| Party ID | -.12 (-.06) | -.07 (-.04) |
| Constant | -3.33** | .42 |
| Pseudo R^2 | .07 | .13 |
| <i>N</i> | 2,289 | 3,531 |

Note: Cell entries are logistic regression coefficients with standardized coefficients in parentheses. Standardized coefficients were calculated using "lstand" postestimation for the "logistic" command in Stata 9.2, defined as $(B*SD)/\sqrt{\pi^2/3}$. See appendix for coding.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed).

TV or radio show to express an opinion, signing a written petition, or not purchasing a product out of protest (boycotting). When we look at these estimates, the effect of the SN factor becomes insignificant, as do several other media variables. Only the traditional media factor is significantly associated with each of the four non-Internet activities. Overall, the findings presented in Table 6 offer a glimpse into how young people participate in politics. Across the board youth appear more likely to participate via the Internet, and this is especially true of SN Web site users.

Thus, our findings from Table 6 introduce the possibility that those who rely on SN Web sites for news are not more likely to participate in politics by traditional means. What about the tendency to vote? Examining this question is always difficult when studying the political behavior of young adults, given that measuring participation in recent elections may be confounded by the fact that a respondent may not have been of legal age. Thus, we use present estimates on the tendency to vote using two measures in Table 7. The first measure is whether or not an individual voted in the 2006 midterm elections, where those who were not old enough to vote at the time were treated as missing data. The second measure asked respondents how likely they were to vote in the upcoming (2008) election (likely or not likely). Although this measure lacks some precision, it does offer a glimpse into an individual's *intention* to participate in politics at this most fundamental of levels.

When the analysis is run only on those young adults who were old enough to vote in 2006, it can be seen that the cable news factor, the traditional news factor, and the podcast factor are all statistically significant and positive. The SN factor, however, is insignificant. In the second column of estimates on the self-reported likelihood of voting in the 2008 presidential election, the SN factor is statistically insignificant as well. Here again, cable news and traditional news are significant positive factors, as is the cable humor factor.

Discussion

The analyses presented above were intended to shed light on the correlates between news consumption from SN Web sites and political engagement. Virtually all of the data point in the same direction, namely, that the potential for SN Web sites to increase youth political engagement has not been realized. Users of these sites tend to seek out views that correspond with their own; they are no more knowledgeable about politics (in general and about the field of presidential candidates) than are their counterparts and, in fact, seem to be less so. Their political participation, as such, seems to be limited to Internet activity, and they do not seem to be more likely to vote.

Our sense is that the hyperbole surrounding new Web developments (Web 2.0) as they relate to citizenship may be just that—hype. In fact, it is reminiscent of earlier hopes for “Web 1.0,” and before that, television, and even earlier developments in mass communications technology (see Margolis & Resnick, 2000). This is not to say that interactive Web technology can do nothing to aid in mobilizing citizens. The success of MoveOn.org and other groups and candidates in raising money suggests otherwise, as does the ability of the Bush campaign in 2004 to mobilize supporters using targeted e-mail lists generated by zip code to form neighborhood campaign groups. Indeed, Barack Obama, with his unparalleled success in online fundraising, online mobilization, and Facebook support, demonstrated that the Internet is fastly becoming an indispensable campaign tool. However, the contention that SN Web sites will spur a democratic revolution may be overstated.

Appendix

Demographic Variables (Tables 3–7)

-
- What is your gender? (0 = Female, 1 = Male) **[Gender]**
 How old are you? (Actual age recorded) **[Age]**
 What is your race? (1 = White, 0 = African American; Non-White Hispanic; Asian; Other)
[Race]
 What is the last grade or class that you completed in school? **[Education]**
 1 = High school incomplete
 2 = High school graduate (Grade 12 or GED certificate)
 3 = Technical, trade, or vocational school AFTER high school
 4 = Some college, no 4-year degree (including associate degree)
 5 = College graduate
 6 = Postgraduate training or professional schooling after college (e.g., toward a master's degree or PhD; law or medical school)

Attitudinal Variables

Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?
[Party ID]

- 1 = Strong Democrat
- 2 = Democrat
- 3 = Independent or neither; don't know; haven't given it much thought
- 4 = Republican
- 5 = Strong Republican

In general, how would you describe your political views? **[Ideology]**

- 1 = Very liberal
- 2 = Liberal
- 3 = Moderate; don't know; haven't given it much thought
- 4 = Conservative
- 5 = Very conservative

Media Exposure Variables (Tables 1 and 2)

During a typical week, can you tell us about how many days do you: (0–7 scale)

- Watch news on the Cable News Channel (CNN)?
- Watch news on the Fox News Channel?
- Watch news on MSNBC?
- Listen to news on the radio?
- Watch or read news on the Internet?
- Read news in a printed newspaper?
- Read news about politics sent to you on your cell phone or PDA?
- Get news from a social networking Web site such as Facebook or MySpace?
- Get news on your iPod (podcasts) or digital music player?
- Get news from YouTube.com?
- Watch news recorded on a TIVO or digital recording device?
- Watch *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*?
- Watch *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert?
- Watch *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*?
- Watch *Late Show with David Letterman*?
- Watch *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*?

News Preference Variables (Table 3)

On a scale of 1–10, please tell us how much you agree with the following statements:

- “I like news sources that share my political point of view”
- “I like news that offers competing points of view on political issues”

On a scale of 1–10, with 1 being NOT AT ALL and 10 being VERY CLOSELY, how closely do you follow these types of news either in the newspaper, on television, the radio, or the Internet?

- News about political figures and events in Washington
- International affairs
- Entertainment

Political Knowledge Measures (Table 4)

Each variable was coded as, 1 = correct answer; 0 = incorrect answer or "don't know."

[Knowledge]

Who is the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives?

Tom DeLay

George W. Bush

Dennis Hastert

Nancy Pelosi

None of these individuals

I don't know

Do you know which party has a majority in the House and Senate of the U.S. Congress?

Republicans

Democrats

The Democrats control the House and the Republicans control the Senate

The Republicans control the House and the Democrats control the Senate

I don't know

Which of the following individuals is a Justice on the U.S. Supreme Court?

William Rehnquist

Richard Gephardt

George Patacki

Condoleezza Rice

None of these individuals

I don't know

Which political party is more conservative?

Republicans

Democrats

I don't know

How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to override a presidential veto?

One third

One half

Two thirds

Three fourths

I don't know

Knowledge of Presidential Primary Candidates Measures (Table 5)

Each dependent variable was coded as, 1 = correct answer; 0 = incorrect answer or "don't know."

Of the several candidates seeking the nomination for president in 2008, do you happen to know which of the candidates is a practicing Mormon?

Mitt Romney

Fred Thompson

Hillary Clinton

- Newt Gingrich
- None of these individuals
- I don't know

Of the several candidates seeking the nomination for president in 2008, do you happen to know which of the candidates was formerly the mayor of New York City?

- Mike Huckabee
- Barack Obama
- Al Gore
- Rudy Giuliani
- None of these individuals
- I don't know

Of the several candidates seeking the nomination for president in 2008, do you happen to know which of the candidates is a senator from New York State?

- John McCain
- Ron Paul
- Hillary Clinton
- Dick Cheney
- None of these individuals
- I don't know

Of the several candidates seeking the nomination for president in 2008, do you happen to know which of the candidates is a first-term U.S. senator from Illinois?

- Barack Obama
- Newt Gingrich
- Nancy Pelosi
- John Edwards
- None of these individuals
- I don't know

Of the several candidates seeking the nomination for president in 2008, do you happen to know which of the candidates was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War?

- Fred Thompson
- John McCain
- Rudy Giuliani
- Mike Gravel
- None of these individuals
- I don't know

Political Participation (Table 6)

Which of the following have you done in the past 12 months? Please check all that apply (1 = yes; 0 = no)

- Written or called any politician at the state, local, or national level
- Written a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine or called a live radio or TV show to express a political opinion
- Posted a message on a blog to express a political opinion
- Signed a written petition
- Signed an e-mail or Web petition

Not purchased a particular product because of conditions under which it is made or because you dislike the conduct of the company that produces it
Forwarded a political e-mail or link to another person

Voting Measures (Table 7)

Did you vote in the 2006 midterm elections?

1 = Yes

0 = No

(missing) = I was not old enough

How likely are you to vote in the 2008 presidential election?

0 = Not at all likely

0 = Not too likely

1 = Somewhat likely

1 = Very likely

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