Profiling Online Political Content Creators: Advancing the Paths to Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has allowed digital media users to be more than just consumers of political information, allowing the chance to create their own online political content. Thus, users can now create personal blogs, post comments on others’ blogs, contribute with citizen news, and upload their videos about current events and public affairs. Drawing from sociological and psychological frameworks, this study explores the socio-demographic and psychological characteristics of online political content creators and the effects of this behavior for the political and civic spheres. A survey of U.S. adults reveals that income and age are negatively correlated with political content creation, as well as emotional stability and life satisfaction, while extraversion was positively related. Further, the creation of political content was a positive predictor of political participation and civic engagement, even after controlling for demographics, psychological factors, media use and trust, suggesting a positive linkage between the production of online political content and both political and civic participatory practices.

Keywords: Civic Participation, Demographics, Digital Media, Internet, Online Content Creation, Personality, Political Participation, Politics

INTRODUCTION

The Web increasingly offers greater opportunities and spaces for people to create, interact, and share material online, and content creation has grown at a fast pace: In 2008, 26.4 million people in the United States had started a blog (Technorati, 2008), and in 2010, 35 hours of video were uploaded every minute to YouTube (2011). In this increasingly interactive and user-generated Web, engaging in these creative activities may be important for the democratic agenda because new media users potentially become not merely consumers of content, but also participatory citizens (Livingstone, 2004). An active interaction in the online public sphere may help people to become engaged in political and civic arenas, which ultimately creates a better democratic environment. For example, Gil de Zúñiga (2009) found that the active usage of
blogs by posting comments and creating entries, rather than passive activities such as reading or browsing, is associated with people’s political participation. Similarly, those who post political or social content are more likely to get engaged in civic activities, including joining a political or civic organization (Smith, Scholzman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). Likewise, expressive political participation via Web has been linked to mobilization in the offline realm (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009), and past research suggest that new technologies have helped Internet users to be more engaged in public affairs (e.g., Williams & Tedesco, 2006).

Despite the increasing importance of creating online content, most of the studies have focused on the production of general online content (e.g., Correa, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Kalmus, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Runnel, & Siibak, 2009). Because of the ever-increasing prevalence of these creative activities, it is relevant to move the discussion forward and investigate more thoroughly specific forms of content creation, such as political content creation, which includes contributing political content to blogs, news websites, and video-sharing applications. For instance, the Pew Internet and American Life project found that 15% of adult Internet users have used the Web by posting comments, photos, or videos related to a political or social issue (Smith et al., 2009).

Just like it happens in offline settings, it is known that well-to-do and better-educated people are more likely to politically participate in online settings by signing an online petition or making a money contribution. However, there are signs that activities that involve user-generated content do not follow these well-established patterns and is done by people who traditionally come from more disadvantaged sectors of the population (Smith et al., 2009). For example, Pew found that political participation in blogs and social networking sites is not characterized by a strong link with socio-economic status (Smith et al., 2009). Similarly, it has been revealed that among online users, ethnic minorities are more likely to engage in content creation than whites (e.g., Correa, 2010).

Internet content creation has been defined in different ways. So far, many studies have investigated specific applications such as social networking sites and blogs (Gueorguieva, 2008; Vitak et al., 2011; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). Other studies have focused on a broad definition of content creation, one that includes general use of social networking sites; creation of a website or blog; and uploading photos, artwork, writing, or audio and video files to the Internet and to social networking sites (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Lenhart, Horrigan & Farrow, 2004; Leung, 2009). We argue that it is time to specify these general definitions and start to incorporate the purposes and contexts of the generation of online content. We answer that call by creating a construct of political content creation, defined as the generation of information about current events or public affairs that potentially favors the public discourse by engaging in civic and political participation. Thus, we measure online political content creation as creating blogs, posting comments on blogs, contributing with citizen news, and uploading videos to the Internet about current events or public affairs.

In addition, active participation in the Web has been explained by approaches that come from sociology or psychology. The former has focused on structural factors such as socio-economic status, while the latter has investigated constructs including personality traits. Research has found they are not randomly distributed among groups; there are differences by gender, race, socioeconomic status, and age (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millenmaier, & Soone Pérez, 2009; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). There are also psychological differences. For instance, people with greater levels of neuroticism and openness to new experiences tend to use blogs more often (Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008). Because research has investigated specific applications or has defined content creation in a very broad manner, it is pertinent to explore who are those that tend to take advantage of these participatory technologies by creating political content and whether that content generation translates into
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