The Impact of Online News Consumption on Young People’s Political Participation

Hao Xiaoming, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Nanyang, Singapore

Wen Nainan, School of Journalism and Communication, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

Cherian George, Department of Journalism, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

The informational usage of media has been identified as one of the most important factors that facilitate citizens’ participation in political activities. This relationship becomes exceptionally intriguing in the 21st century, which is characterized by a growing popularity of new media, and concurrently, a decline of political and civic engagement in many societies, particularly among young people. Research findings about the link between new media usage and political participation have been inconclusive, and specific processes through which new media usage, especially the informational usage of such media, may affect political participation remain less than lucid. In this study, we propose a theoretical framework under which political knowledge and political efficacy are used to explain the possible connection between online news consumption and political participation. Through a survey of university students in Singapore, this study shows that the young people’s consumption of online news is directly related to both online and offline political participation. At the same time, the consumption of online news is also indirectly related to online and offline political participation via political efficacy. Political knowledge, however, is found to be a mediating factor between online news consumption and online political participation but not offline political participation. This study not only allows us a more holistic view of the impact of online news on young people’s political and civic engagement but also contributes to the existing literature on the relationship between news consumption and political participation by incorporating both online and offline political activities in the proposed theoretical model.

Keywords: Internet, News Consumption, Political Participation, Singapore, Youth

DOI: 10.4018/ijep.2014040102
INTRODUCTION

Citizens’ political participation is considered a key element for a healthy democratic society (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002) as it constitutes an important means for citizens to have their voices heard and for “empowering the powerless in society” (Eveland, 1993, p. 24-25). Only when citizens are actively engaged in political activities can democracy show its true vitality. More recent research, however, has documented a decline in political and civic engagement, especially among young people (Mindich, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Today, young people in various parts of the world are found to be much less interested in politics, less attentive to politics, and less prone to vote (Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Mindich, 2005; Niemi & Weisber, 2001).

Some scholars argue that research findings about the decline in the young people’s political participation may not be accurate as the young people are taking part in politics in a different way from the previous generations. They may not join political parties, but are nevertheless active in non-governmental groups. They may not vote in elections, but are more willing to express their views about specific issues (Norris, 2002). They are less likely to be engaged in formal political debates, but they do not shy from participating in single issue movements and networks (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Norris, 2002).

Another factor that needs to be considered in assessing young people’s engagement in political and civic affairs is the role of new information and communication technologies in their political life. For example, the Internet is often regarded as a crucial domain for the young to engage in various new forms of political participation (Bennett, 2000; Livingstone, 2007). It is easy to build a website and express opinions on an issue in various online forums. Email campaigning serves as a fast and cheap way to spread information and gather support. It has been argued that young people spend an increasing amount of time in the digital environment, and this medium fits with their preferred forms of communication (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). In other words, online communication, which is more efficient and less costly for the young, is likely to be the preferred means for some of them to know about and change the world through collective actions.

Although a sizable body of research has demonstrated significant effects of the use of the Internet on citizens’ engagement in political activities, specific processes by which those effects take place still remain less than lucid (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Norris, 1999; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Tolber & McNeal, 2003). Through a survey of college students in Singapore, this study aims to fill this gap by first expanding the operational definition of political participation to cover both online and offline political activities and then proposing a theoretical model to investigate both the direct and indirect paths through which online news consumption influences the young people’s political participation. By including various online political activities in an expanded scope of political activities considered relevant, we hope to examine young people’s political and civic engagement in a more holistic manner. In addition, this also allows us to understand better the impact of online news on young people’s political participation, as online news consumption and online political activities are more likely to be related and to promote each other. Such practical considerations are likely to have theoretical implications as well. The general question we aim to answer is: Does online news consumption promote political participation among young people? If so, how?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Participation

Political participation is often discussed in four dimensions: voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, and collective actions (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Many studies have used these four dimensions to examine the levels of political engagement
Organizational Culture: A Pillar for Knowledge Management
www.igi-global.com/chapter/organizational-culture-pillar-knowledge-management/50753?camid=4v1a

Mobile Extension in Enhancing the Livelihood of Farmers in India
www.igi-global.com/article/mobile-extension-in-enhancing-the-livelihood-of-farmers-in-india/199069?camid=4v1a