Seriously Social: Young Adults, Social Media and News

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between young adults' social media use and their news consumption. A survey of two large college populations found significant correlations indicating a negative relationship between social media use and consumption of news (n = 345). Two scenarios were tested: a complementary engagement hypothesis, which suggests that social media use may aid news consumption through ambient exposure to news, and Robert Putnam's displacement hypothesis, in which social media use may consume time and attention, thereby impeding news use. The results of the analysis suggest that social media use – specifically social networking sites such as Facebook – may in fact displace news use at the cost of leaving young people less informed.

Keywords: Displacement Hypothesis, Informed Democracy, News, Social Media, Social Networking Sites (SNS), Two-Step Flow

INTRODUCTION

When then-senator Barack Obama offered his own response to President Bush’s final State of the Union address, on January 28, 2008, there was not much of a response from those following traditional media. That is because it was not covered, at least not the night of the speech. In fact, then-Senator Obama was not even the one giving the official Democratic response – that honor belonged to then-Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius (Shogan & Neale, 2010; Stelter, 2008). Within a few weeks of the five-minute Obama talk being posted on YouTube, it had “been viewed more than 1.3 million times, been linked by more than 500 blogs and distributed widely on social networking sites like Facebook” (Stelter, 2008). It was an embodiment of the promise of viral news and would seem to foretell a promising future for informed democracy in the United States given that young adults were, at that time, much more likely to be online and to be engaging in viral social activities than their parents and grandparents (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). And yet, late in that decade, those aged 30 to 60 were much more likely to be following, and sharing, politics online than those under 30.

Several important differences in news habits by age have been previously acknowledged (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2007; Saba, 2009). First seen in the 1960s among the Baby
Boomer children of Americans born before 1945, a generational decline in news consumption has continued and accelerated since (Putnam, 2000). Americans aged 50 and older have become twice as likely to read a newspaper and much more likely to follow news on television as those under 30 (Cornog, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). There is growing evidence that news consumption habits are not changing with the availability of new technology so much as old habits are simply migrating online. Contemporary scholars have noted that being online is less important to informed democracy than specific online behavior, such as consuming political news (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2001). For example, Americans over 40 are much more likely to consume news online, despite the fact that those under 30 are much more likely to be online (Smith et al., 2009). This generationally predictable behavior is labeled “news avoidance”; importantly, it has been shown to predict less robust public affairs knowledge and lower levels of civic engagement and political participation (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Halpern, 2005; Poindexter, 2007). Age cohort – by generation – clearly plays a role. “Members of today’s older generation are slightly more interested in electoral campaigns than were their predecessors four decades ago, while youths today are less interested than youths were in the 1950s and 1960s” (Putnam, 2000, p. 37, italics in original), despite access to and familiarity with the latest online communication technologies (Watkins, 2009).

Of interest to this study is whether technology offers an electronic bridge, of sorts, between less traditional media use and being informed—whether social media use augments news avoidance among young adults by supplanting traditional media with passive exposure to news, via one’s online social network. A New York Times article captured this sentiment nicely with this quote: “If the news is that important, it will find me” (Stelter, 2008, para. 7). That was the response to a market researcher asking participants about their news habits. This now-famous quote ran, of all places, in the New York Times, begging the sardonic question of whether that student ever saw his quote. Central to this discussion is an examination of whether young adults on social media are engaged in what Putnam (2000) calls the time-displacement hypothesis, in which one type of media use (in this case, social media) displaces other activity (traditional news consumption), or whether we are witnessing a competing view (see Kang & Kwak, 2003; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005), essentially a complementary engagement hypothesis in which the use of new technology adequately supplants traditional media use via the sharing of traditional news through social networking sites.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The central organizing theory of this work is the two-step flow of news, first coined more than half a century ago by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). As the field of communication research emerged after World War II, investigators became aware of a much more nuanced and complex relationship between the source and the receiver (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), discovering, in essence, a negotiation between the media and their audience.

In scrutinizing this complexity, Katz and Lazarsfeld described four factors which intervene in the transmission of a message from the mass media to the mass public: (1) exposure, access or attention; (2) differences among media channels; (3) media content, and; (4) psychological predispositions of the audience (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Notably, one must be exposed to, and arguably even receptive to, a message before any influence can take place; newspapers, radio, television and the Internet are inherently, and prodigiously different from each other; content matters, especially in today’s era of self-selection in media channels; and everything from poverty level to prejudice might be expected to moderate or mediate a media message – what
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