POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE ONLINE ERA:
MORAL PSYCHOLOGY OF NEWS MEDIA CONSUMPTION, NEW FORMS OF NEWS
MEDIA, AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

by
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ABSTRACT

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Drawing on data from the moral psychology of political communication and literature
on news media consumption, this thesis explores the relationships between new forms
of news media and longstanding trends in the moral psychology of political communi-
cation. By discussing dynamic changes in the form and content of news media, as well
as the new venues through which it is experienced, this thesis highlights three areas in
which new forms of media place pressure on existing literature. Namely, it holds that
the ways in which individuals experience new forms of news media place pressure on
existing literature centering around the homogeneity of political discussion networks,
the transmission of political expertise, and the credibility of news media. The implica-
tions of these pressures are numerous and multiply caused, and impel policymakers to
take seriously questions concerning the regulation of news media content.

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I. Introduction

As a blanket term, *political discourse* encompasses a broad array of sub-fields and areas of specialization. Throughout the literature on the subject, academics have deftly toed the line between precision and synthesis. As I am interested in how the causal ingredients of political discourse interplay both with one another and new forms of media, I will err on the side of synthesis. Necessarily, I owe a word of apology to specialists in any part of this enormous subject.

Over the past half-century, political discourse in the United States has experienced dynamic changes. These changes have arisen by way of new media methods and mediums. Importantly, these changes are multiply caused, and owe debts not only to technological, but also political, religious, and racial changes. That is, the state of any mass political communication is simultaneously contingent on the culture in which it manifests as well as the technological capabilities of that culture.

As these changes have occurred, scholars in numerous fields have committed their work to explaining, or, at the very least, describing, the ways in which recent changes have arisen. Naturally, some fields of academic literature are particularly well positioned to explore the working parts of political communication. In this thesis, I will draw on prior research from two such fields: (1) studies of news media consumption, and (2) the moral psychology of political communication.

Any such thesis, by design, must be committed to synthesis of these disciplines. Naturally, any such analysis will do an injustice to the work of specialists in any narrow

corner of these fields. That said, I do hope that a discussion of each of these fields will empower me to identify tensions within the literature that imply a need for further exploration.

Structurally, this thesis will begin with two literature reviews. First, I will review literature on the moral psychology of political communication. This section will explore the construction of group identity, the formation of biases based on group identity, the impact of threats on group action, the homogeneity of discussion networks, and the transmission of expertise.

Directly following will be a literature review on media consumption. Presented in two parts, it will consider the role of media consumption both in offline and online formats. The research I address that is pertinent to offline media consumption will center around traditional news mediums (television, radio, and print). It will consider both the media's power as agenda-setter and the tension that exists in media programming between what is profitable to present and what is objectively true to report.

The second portion of the media consumption section of this thesis will focus on online media consumption. It will address the impacts of online media consumption on social capital, political participation, the destabilization of institutions, homogeneity within political discussion networks, and the future of political discourse.

From there, I will devote an analysis chapter to achieving three goals. First, I will analyze three "pressure points" at which the moral psychology literature implicates that the literature on media consumption might be in need of revision. Second, I will speculate on the ways in which these themes contribute to- and are exacerbated by- one

another. Finally, I will devote closing remarks to exploring the ways in which these pressures implicate the agendas of policy makers.

II. Moral psychology of political communication

The moral psychology of political communication can be understood as the ways in which an individual's membership within various groups affects who they discuss politics with, what they are biased to believe about others, and what motivates them to action. Groups can be bound along religious, political, gender, or otherwise social lines. Both the content of group identity as well as the effects of it are multiply caused and have numerous predictable effects. This section is designed to explore both the forces that contribute to group identity, the formation of biases, the impact of threats on group action, the homogeneity of discussion networks, and the transmission of expertise.

A. Group Identity and Bias

Huckfeldt et al (1995) stressed the importance of interpersonal discussion beyond the conventional boundaries of massive, cohesive groups. They held that if it is true that political communication is bound by strong social groups, then we should expect the flow of political information to be independent from opinion distributions within the broader communication network.[1] However, when social communications exist outside of cohesive groups, one would think that information flows should reflect this. To test this expectation, Huckfeldt et al considered 1992 Presidential election survey results, specifically portions concerned with respondents' social networks. They found

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[1] Huckfeldt, Robert, Paul Allen Beck, Russell J. Dalton, and Jeffrey Levine. "Political Environments, Cohesive Social Groups, and the Communication of Public Opinion." American Journal of Political Science 39.4 (1995): 1025-054.

that in fact, individuals are exposed to larger opinion environments based on the environmental patterns of their smaller networks.[2] Further, they held that citizen micro-networks serve as valuable lenses for how they will operate within the flow of macro-network political information. Thus, they concluded, the macro-environment of political communication relies on the micro-level social groups that engage in political communication. That is, perhaps the best way of understanding macro-level trends of political discourse is viewing them as fluid reflectors of micro-networks of social groups, family, and close acquaintances.

One way of understanding group identities is as bias machines. The stronger a citizen identifies with their party, the more positively they feel about members of their group.[3] Bias is more linked to group identity than ideological content.[4] Importantly, determining the favorability of a policy is much more easily accomplished by considering not the policy, but the ideological camp that advocated it.[5] That is, as individuals tend to care more about relations with group members than abstract ideologies, our political opinions are fundamentally rooted in social ground.

The role of groups as bias machines can be seen through recurring themes in moral psychology research. Group members react more strongly to the emotions of in-

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[2] Huckfeldt, Robert, Paul Allen Beck, Russell J. Dalton, and Jeffrey Levine. "Political Environments, Cohesive Social Groups, and the Communication of Public   Opinion." American Journal of Political Science 39.4 (1995): 1025-054.

[3] Simon, Bernd, Claudia Kulla, and Martin Zobel. "On being More than just a Part of the Whole: Regional Identity and Social Distinctiveness." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 25.3 (1995): 325-40. Print.

[4] Malka, Ariel, and Yphtach Lelkes. "More than Ideology: Conservative–Liberal Identity and Receptivity to Political Cues." *Social Justice Research* 23.2 (2010): 156-88. Print.

[5] Malka, Ariel, and Yphtach Lelkes. "More than Ideology: Conservative–Liberal Identity and Receptivity to Political Cues." *Social Justice Research* 23.2 (2010): 156-88. Print.

group than out-group members.[67] It is not the mere existence of emotions that arouse citizens, but, importantly, *who* is expressing them.

Further, group biases, once engrained, are extremely difficult to step away from. Kunda (1990) found that people are motivated not just to have views that are correct, but also to pursue information that supports existing views, even if those positions are incorrect.[8] Commonly referred to in the literature as *motivated reasoning*, this sort of behavior serves to deeply engrain and reinforce biases, especially within the bounds of tight-knit groups.

B. Threat

There are various ways to diminish or exacerbate group biases. One reliable example of how to exacerbate group (especially out-group) biases is *threat. Threat*, as I will employ the term, can be understood as any communication that calls into question the social status or wellbeing of a group.

Increasingly, evidence indicates that groups are bound by what angers or outrages them. Brewer and Caporael (2008) suggested that threat plays an important role in the interplay of group identity and out-group hostility.[9] There is evidence that an external threat cultivates in-group solidarity and tightens in-group boundaries in exact

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[6] Chiao, Joan Y., Nicholas E. Bowman, and Harleen Gill. "The Political Gender Gap: Gender Bias in Facial Inferences that Predict Voting Behavior: E3666." *PLoS One* 3.10 (2008) Print.

[7] Jay J. Van Bavel, Dominic J. Packer, and William A. Cunningham. "Modulation of the Fusiform Face Area Following Minimal Exposure to Motivationally Relevant Faces: Evidence of in-Group Enhancement (Not Out-Group Disregard)." *Journal of cognitive neuroscience* 23.11 (2011): 3343-54. Print.

[8] Kunda, Ziva. "The case for motivated reasoning." Psychological bulletin 108.3 (1990): 480.

[9] Brewer, Marilynn B., and Linnda R. Caporael. "An evolutionary perspective on social identity: Revisiting groups." Evolution and social psychology 143 (2006): 161.

proportion to the degree of a given threat.[10][11] The findings of Roccas and Brewer sug-gest that threat promotes convergence of identities, and, further, that the less diverse the identities with in a group are, the lower tolerance for out-groups will be.[12]

The link between a threatened in-group identity and out-group hostility is cor-roborated by the findings of Pratto and Gladford (2008), who found that when out-comes for Iraq and the United States did not compete, Americans valued Iraqi and American lives equally, but when those nations were in competition for favorable out-comes Americans overwhelmingly valued American lives more.[13]

Within the realm of possible threats, there exists a hierarchy. As group identity is caught up in cultural practices and race, one would expect that one's cultural and racial identity have heavy roles in the generation of bias. Sniderman et al (2004) found less opposition to unskilled immigrants who might pose an economic threat than to immigrants who did not fit into national culture and thus posed a symbolic threat.[14]

Within the realm of threat reaction, different members within groups react with varying degrees of empathy to out-group members. These reactions fall along pre-dictable lines: namely, the strength with which one identifies with their group. Glasford,

[10] Coser, Lewis A. The functions of social conflict. Vol. 9. Routledge, 1956.

[11] Levine, Robert A., and Donald T. Campbell. "Ethnocentrism: Theories of conflict, ethnic atti-tudes and group conflict." New York: Wiley. 242 Social identity: international perspectives (1972): 271-299.

[12] Roccas, Sonia, and Marilynn B. Brewer. "Social identity complexity." Personality and Social Psychology Review 6.2 (2002): 88-106.

[13] Pratto, Felicia, and Demis E. Glasford. "Ethnocentrism and the value of a human life." Journal of personality and social psychology 95.6 (2008): 1411.

[14] Sniderman, Paul M., Louk Hagendoorn, and Markus Prior. "Predisposing factors and situa-tional triggers: Exclusionary reactions to immigrant minorities." American political science review 98.1 (2004): 35-49.

Dovidio, and Pratto (2009) found that Americans that strongly identify with national identity feel less discomfort than others when told that the United states has bombed civilians.[15] Musgrove and McGarty (2008) found that strong group identifiers react more angrily to threats made about the entire group.[16] The stronger a person's partisan affiliation, the more likely they are to react with feelings of schadenfreude to reading about bad things happening to candidates from opposite parties, even if those events negatively affect the country.[17]

Further, strong group identity generates strong defensiveness in the face of group criticism. Proposing societal explanations (as opposed to individual accountability) for low African-American success in business elicited far more defensiveness among white students that strongly identified with their race, but led to greater support for African-Americans from whites that did not strongly identify with their race.[18] Lowery et al (2006) manipulated the effects of employment-related affirmative action programs and found that whites with a strong white identity were far less supportive when the program was framed in terms of white job loss.[19] Gibson (2008) found, for exam-

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[15] Glasford, Demis E., John F. Dovidio, and Felicia Pratto. "I continue to feel so good about us: In-group identification and the use of social identity—Enhancing strategies to reduce intragroup dissonance." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 35.4 (2009): 415-427.

[16] Musgrove, Luke, and Craig McGarty. "Opinion-based group membership as a predictor of collective emotional responses and support for pro-and anti-war action." Social Psychology 39.1 (2008): 37-47.

[17] Combs, David JY, et al. "Politics, schadenfreude, and in-group identification: The sometimes happy thing about a poor economy and death." Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 45.4 (2009): 635-646.

[18] Andreychik, Michael R., and Michael J. Gill. "In-group identity moderates the impact of social explanations on intergroup attitudes: External explanations are not inherently prosocial." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 35.12 (2009): 1632-1645.

[19] Lowery, Brian S., et al. "Concern for the in-group and opposition to affirmative action." Journal of personality and social psychology 90.6 (2006): 961.

ple, that black south africans who identify strongly with their ethnic group are less likely to believe that justice has been adequately performed when asked to react to an experimental vignette in which a black squatter is evicted from land on which she is squatting.[20] These findings are corroborated also by history, as whites who felt they were "doing worse" than African-Americans were more likely to support the candidacy of George Wallace in 1968.[21]

Notably, research suggests that strong partisan identity is joined by religious identity among predictors of translating threat into out-group hostility. Religion also serves the function of exacerbating out-group attitudes. Tausch et al (2007) found that Northern Irish that are strong religious identifiers are more likely to translate perceived threats into negative out-group positions.[22] Further, still, certain personality types are more prone to strong group identity than others: Individuals who have low openness to new experiences are stronger partisans.[23]

Importantly, threats need not be actual or realized in order to elicit these responses. Scheepers and Ellemers (2005) found that a possible decline in high socioe-

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[20] Gibson, James L. "Group identities and theories of justice: An experimental investigation into the justice and injustice of land squatting in South Africa." The Journal of Politics 70.3 (2008): 700-716.

[21] Vanneman, Reeve D., and Thomas F. Pettigrew. "Race and relative deprivation in the urban United States." Race 13.4 (1972): 461-486.

[22] Tausch, Nicole, et al. "Cross-community contact, perceived status differences, and intergroup attitudes in Northern Ireland: The mediating roles of individual-level versus group-level threats and the moderating role of social identification." Political Psychology 28.1 (2007): 53-68.

[23] Gerber, Alan S., et al. "Personality and political attitudes: Relationships across issue domains and political contexts." American Political Science Review 104.1 (2010): 111-133.

conomics status was just as stressful as being assigned a low socioeconomic status.[24]

Threat need not be tied to actual outcomes, but only perceived as producing adverse

outcomes for group members.

Threat affects not just group identity, but also the way that group identity inter-

acts with approval of various political positions. Kam and Ramos (2008) find that during

time of national threats, national identity shapes presidential approval, whereas during

un-threatened, or "normal" political environments, partisan identity drives presidential

approval.[25] Importantly, this exists at a level beneath ideology, at the social level.

There are actionable consequences to feeling threatened. A multitude of re-

search suggests that if groups feel threatened, they are much more likely to translate

the threat into outrage, and their commitment to action and fervor of group identity be-

come boosted.[26][27] Within the vein of outrage generation, there are very specific sorts of

political candidates that benefit from its promulgation. Lambert et al (2010) found that

anger increases support of pro-war candidates.[28]

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[24] Scheepers, Daan, Naomi Ellemers, and Nieska Sintemaartensdijk. "Suffering from the possibility of status loss: Physiological responses to social identity threat in high status groups." European Journal of Social Psychology 39.6 (2009): 1075-1092.

[25] Kam, Cindy D., and Jennifer M. Ramos. "Joining and leaving the rally: Understanding the surge and decline in presidential approval following 9/11." Public Opinion Quarterly 72.4 (2008): 619-650.

[26] Leach, Colin Wayne, Aarti Iyer, and Anne Pedersen. "Anger and guilt about ingroup advantage explain the willingness for political action." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 32.9 (2006): 1232-1245.

[27] Mackie, Diane M., Thierry Devos, and Eliot R. Smith. "Intergroup emotions: explaining offensive action tendencies in an intergroup context." Journal of personality and social psychology 79.4 (2000): 602.

[28] Lambert, Alan J., et al. "Rally effects, threat, and attitude change: an integrative approach to understanding the role of emotion." Journal of personality and social psychology 98.6 (2010): 886.

Just as it is possible to motivate people to political action with threatening messages, there are other sorts of messages that predictably stifle political action. Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) found that negative advertising serves as a massively demobilizing force, especially among centrists and non-partisans.[29] Within negative news, there is the sub-genre of news that purports to be threatening or angering. Marcus (2000) found that threats, with almost automatic regularity, jolt citizens from their normal cognitive routines and increase the seeking of new information.[30]

These things in mind, it is not unreasonable to suggest that given the moral psychology of group identity, the messages that are most successful at mobilizing citizens will call into question racial, religious, and cultural status, and will foster the convergence of group identities, out-group hostilities, and support for candidates that can be viewed as militaristic. Further, it is possible to mobilize with threatening messages and demobilize with negative advertising. Finally, these trends fall along very specific lines of group commitment. Those most closely tied to a group identity are more likely than others to be mobilized by threatening messages, and those who have no strong group affiliations are more likely than others to be demobilized by negative advertising.

C. Homogeneity of discussion networks

Delving into the sub-genre of group behavior that is political communication, the most effective check on the rise of convergent group identities is a diversity of voices within a given group. Parsons (2010) illustrated the positive effects of dissent, finding

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[29] Ansolabehere, Stephen and Shanto Iyengar. Going negative: How political advertisements shrink and polarize the electorate. The Free Press,, 1997.

[30] Marcus, George E. "Emotions in politics." Annual Review of Political Science 3.1 (2000): 221-250.

that the presence of dissenting opinions decreases the polarization of reactive emotions.[31]

There is a level on which the literature suggests that traditional networks insulate, almost necessarily, against great amounts of homogeneity. Huckfeldt et al (2013) described a framework in which political discussion networks are unlikely to become too homogenous, as they are like a neighborhood: we can choose which neighborhood we live in, but not our actual neighbors, and not whether our neighbors ask for our participation in political initiatives.[32] Klofstad (2009) argued that political discussion networks are not constructed in order to manufacture political homogeneity, as they often include people at work and various other social functions over whom you have no control of choosing.[33]

However, there is a great deal of evidence that the "neighborhood view" of political discussion is not as convincing as it might, at first, appear. Even if we can agree that, as Sears and Freedman (1967) suggested, there is little evidence that people consciously attempt to avoid information that conflicts with their views, we may maintain that insulation from significant amounts of disparate views still exists.[34]

This phenomenon of unintentional homogeneity was explored by Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995), who described a sort of "de facto selectivity," in which people simply

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[31] Parsons, Bryan M. "Social networks and the affective impact of political disagreement." Political Behavior 32.2 (2010): 181-204.

[32] Huckfeldt, Robert, et al. "Networks, interdependence, and social influence in politics." (2013).

[33] Klofstad, Casey A., Scott D. McClurg, and Meredith Rolfe. "Measurement of political discussion networks: A comparison of two "name generator" procedures." Public Opinion Quarterly 73.3 (2009): 462-483.

[34] Sears, David O., and Jonathan L. Freedman. "Selective exposure to information: A critical review." Public Opinion Quarterly 31.2 (1967): 194-213.

find themselves in discussion networks that tend to be politically homogenous and thus reinforce their existing views.[35] While there may be no bias in information seeking, they contended, there may well be bias in the information to which people are exposed. Thus, homogeneity can be created even absent intentionality.

Further, people tend to overestimate the extent to which their networks are diverse. Stromer-Galley (2003) found as a result of seventy interviews with people who converse about political topics online that people tend to believe that they engage with a diversity of opinions whilst online.[36] There was a deep-seated appreciation for this diversity among most respondents, even if that diversity included offensively racist of misogynistic viewpoints.[37] All of this supports the hypothesis that generally, people tend to value diversity of opinion in political communication. This comes, of course, as a rebuttal to the idea that online users actively seek out opinions similar to their own.

Importantly, all of this references how individuals perceive their own actions, not what those actions actually consist of. If anything is clear from the rest of the literature, it is that people often unwittingly become members of ideological silos whilst online. The value of this research is not that it rebuts that fact, but that it evidences that at a basic level, people do not intentionally enter ideologically homogenous groups- that if it happens, it occurs at an unintentional level.

D. Transmission of expertise:

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[35] Huckfeldt, R. Robert, and John Sprague. Citizens, politics and social communication: Information and influence in an election campaign. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[36] Stromer-Galley, Jennifer. "Diversity of political conversation on the Internet: Users' perspectives." Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 8.3 (2003): 0-0.

[37] Stromer-Galley, Jennifer. "Diversity of political conversation on the Internet: Users' perspectives." Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 8.3 (2003): 0-0.

As late as 2001, citizens were reasonably good at estimating the political expertise of others. Huckfeldt (2001) found that discussants, in terms of political knowledge, fared roughly in correlation to how their peers predicted.[38] Interestingly, there is no evidence that people, even if they can recognize who experts are, weigh expert opinions more heavily than non-expert opinions.[39] However, Huckfeldt also found that citizens are more likely to converse with people they perceive are experts more frequently than non experts. Further, he held that people who perceive themselves to be experts are more willing to share their opinions than others. These things in mind, it is arguably the case that social communication produces the "right" result (consultation with experts), but through a method with one major weakness: the non-weighting of expert opinions as more important. Essentially, expert voices override non-experts in political communication networks, but because experts speak, and are listened to, more often, not because their views are thought to be of more value. This leaves open an alarming possibility for the transmission of expertise: if a media could permit participation of an abundance "self-perceived experts" with little actual knowledge, people could become over-saturated with non-expert opinions and cease heeding expert opinions.

III. News Media Consumption

Michael Schudson seeks to highlight the neglect of political science literature with respect to the news media as a political institution.[40] He feels that this neglect has

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[38]Huckfeldt, Robert. "The social communication of political expertise." American Journal of Political Science (2001): 425-438.

[39] Huckfeldt, R. Robert, and John Sprague. Citizens, politics and social communication: Information and influence in an election campaign. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[40] Schudson, Michael. "The News Media as Political Institutions." *Annual Review of Political Science* 5.1 (2002): 249-69. Print.

occurred in spite of the long history of politically funded newspapers and scholars who increasingly refer to the "mediatization" of political discourse. When evaluating the news media as a political institution, three schools of theory emerge. First, *political economy* views highlight media ownership and the behavior of news institutions.[41] A second family of theory focuses on the social organization of news media and considers news content in light of daily interactions of reporters and their sources.[42] Finally, the third style of research views the news as a cultural phenomenal that incorporates our belief systems and values into narratives, but does so unconsciously.[43] The literature in this section will variously represent research from each of these schools, seeking to decipher the role of news media as a political institution. Understanding news media as a political institution begs a question: what, then, is the news media's power?

In order to answer this question, this chapter is divided into two parts: (1) research on news media consumption before the advent of the internet, and (2) news media consumption in the online era. The first section will consider news media's role as agenda-setter, as well as its often discussed "objectivity problem," as brought on by the tension between profitable sensationalism and objectivity. The second section will discuss the internet's relationship with the generation of social capital, political participation, the destabilization of institutions, homogeneity within political discussion networks, and the future of political discourse.

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[41] Schudson, Michael. "The News Media as Political Institutions." *Annual Review of Political Science* 5.1 (2002): 249-69. Print.

[42] Schudson, Michael. "The News Media as Political Institutions." *Annual Review of Political Science* 5.1 (2002): 249-69. Print.

[43] Schudson, Michael. "The News Media as Political Institutions." *Annual Review of Political Science* 5.1 (2002): 249-69. Print.

A. Traditional news media consumption

 (1) Agenda-setting

 The literature suggests that in experiencing news media, readers internalize not just information about a given issue, but also, importantly, how much significance to attach to that issue based on the amount of information in a news story and its position within the media outlet's programming. The mass news media, through its ordering of programming, determines the important issues, thus "setting" the agenda of campaigns. McCombs and Shaw (1972) found a near-perfect correlation between the ordering of issues as "important" by the public and the amount of time given those issues in the news media.[44] Part of news media's power lies in its ability to inflate what is important to people, regardless of whether or not it should be. Not to lean too far forward in scope, but understanding the news media in this way might help explain why a nation may become transfixed on issues that bear seemingly no relevance to the question of how a candidate for political office might govern.

 Within this agenda-setting authority, media outlets gain or lose power based on their reputation. Deephouse (2000) explored the role of media reputation as a means of generating capital gains for media outlets. Defining *media reputation* as the overall evaluation of a firm presented in the media, and found a positive correlation between the reputations of media outlets and capital gains made by financial backers.[45] Thus, news media outlets have vested interests in being *reputable.*

 (2) The objectivity problem

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[44] McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. "The agenda-setting function of mass media." Public opinion quarterly 36.2 (1972): 176-187.

[45] Deephouse, David L. "Media reputation as a strategic resource: An integration of mass communication and resource-based theories." Journal of management 26.6 (2000): 1091-1112.

Pressure is placed on the "reputation" literature in a curious way. Typically, we think of journalistic reputation as being closely tied to credibility. While this may be true of news media outlets, a stress arises on the credibility front: namely, the tension between what is profitable to report and what is responsible to report. Deephouse (2000) held that the implications of this tension are far-reaching, not least of which being that the tension between reporting the truth and garnering profit presents a dilemma for media outlets in that it potentially degrades their objectivity in favor of that which leads them to be highly rated, or "reputable."[46] This tension leads, then, to a distinction that might seem counterintuitive: increasingly, *reputable,* when used in reference to news media outlets, becomes conflated with being highly rated.

The literature reflects that certain media marketing and content strategies prove more useful to the end of generating profit than others. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) argued that the movements that most successfully utilize media focus their attention on audience size, the visual aspects of media, and emphasize the thematic and entertainment values of their messages.[47] Importantly, this research is corroborated by other literature within the field to the extent that it suggests that successful messages in modern media tend to be brief, sensational, and thematically framed.[48]

Delving more specifically into this tension, Savigny (2002) contended that the sphere of political communication is defined by a tension between free market and ob-

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[46] Deephouse, David L. "Media reputation as a strategic resource: An integration of mass communication and resource-based theories." Journal of management 26.6 (2000): 1091-1112.

[47] Gamson, William A., and Gadi Wolfsfeld. "Movements and media as interacting systems." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 528.1 (1993): 114-125.

[48] Bouza F. The impact area of political communication: citizenship faced with public discourse. International Review Of Sociology [serial online]. July 2004;14(2):245-259.

jective, democratic principles.[49] That is, by competition between the interest in reelection by politicians and the interest in profit by the media. The author held that this tension would result in political debates becoming increasingly about theater rather than the exploration of ideology.[50]

Bouza (2004) considered the role of public communication in radicalizing opinions within public discourse. Specifically, Bouza viewed this issue through the lens of television, to the extent that it is a source of political news. Importantly, television dictates that political parties must necessarily adjust messages to the needs of television formatting, which Bouza believed has a constricting impact on the length and information content of messages.[51] The consequences of this, he held, are far-reaching, emphasizing that political rhetoric is altered within television to become more sensational.[52]

The work of Pan and Kosicki (1993) explored the friction between the objective and the sensational aspects of media by studying a phenomena referred to in the literature as framing- namely, the ways in which issues are presented with the goal of promulgating not objective truth, but a specific narrative designed to bolster the ratings of a certain interest group.[53] They identified four methods- syntactical, script, thematic,

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[49] Savigny, Heather. "Public opinion, political communication and the internet." Politics 22.1 (2002): 1-8.

[50] Savigny, Heather. "Public opinion, political communication and the internet." Politics 22.1 (2002): 1-8.

[51] Bouza F. The impact area of political communication: citizenship faced with public discourse. International Review Of Sociology [serial online]. July 2004;14(2):245-259.

[52] Bouza F. The impact area of political communication: citizenship faced with public discourse. International Review Of Sociology [serial online]. July 2004;14(2):245-259.

[53] Pan, Zhongdang, and Gerald M. Kosicki. "Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse." Political communication 10.1 (1993): 55-75.

and rhetorical structures- that news media outlets choose to frame issues through.[54] In their conceptual framework, these can be understood not as competing methods, but rather coexisting tools to achieve the common goal of framing narratives and manufacturing political opinions.[55]

Importantly, the literature of offline media consumption is marked by a belief that the media, due to a need to appeal to large audiences, remains mostly objective. Mutz (2001) employed national survey data to analyze how many politically dissimilar views people are exposed to based on the sorts of political information that they consume. She contended that individual ability to control their selective exposure to news is the key variable in determining whether a source translates into exposure of dissimilar views.[56] Importantly, she found that individuals are exposed to far more dissimilar views on news media than in interpersonal discussion networks.[57]

Her findings apply pressure to the common misconception that news media promulgates similar views by finding that individual discussant networks tend to be far more homogenous than news media agendas. This is due, Mutz believed, to the impersonal nature of news media- that is, news media has less of a vested interest in getting along with specific individuals, and thus caters messages to broader audiences than interpersonal discussion networks can allow or account for.

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[54] Pan, Zhongdang, and Gerald M. Kosicki. "Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse." Political communication 10.1 (1993): 55-75.

[55] Pan, Zhongdang, and Gerald M. Kosicki. "Framing analysis: An approach to news discourse." Political communication 10.1 (1993): 55-75.

[56] Mutz, Diana C. "Facilitating Communication across Lines of Political Difference: The Role of Mass Media." American Political Science Review 95.1 (2001): 97-114.

[57] Mutz, Diana C. "Facilitating Communication across Lines of Political Difference: The Role of Mass Media." American Political Science Review 95.1 (2001): 97-114.

B. Online Media Consumption

It would do an injustice to the complexity of the last two decades to formally treat the internet age as a monolith. There are at least two significant functions of the internet that entail vastly different user experiences. First, the internet can be understood as the greatest and most thorough storehouse of information that mankind has ever created. Second, it can be viewed in terms of its function of being a vehicle through which interactive social media on a mass scale is made possible. Importantly, these functions exist in increasingly overlapping magisteria. Social media hubs like Facebook aggregate individuals' social life and news media into a single platform. Given their interrelationship, it would do a disservice to treat the internet solely as an information aggregate or social facilitator. Thus, this section of the literature review will explore both functions.

Dimaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson (2001) provided a meta-analysis considers the sociological implications of the internet on society. Their research described the ways in which the internet as a medium is uniquely situated to integrated modes of communication that had heretofore been necessarily exclusive.[58] They held that the internet does not constrict or displace current longstanding behaviors, but rather complement the ways in which they are experienced.[59] Further, they hold that the implications of social media are not determined solely by the internet itself, but

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[58] DiMaggio, Paul, et al. "Social implications of the Internet." Annual review of sociology 27.1 (2001): 307-336.

[59] DiMaggio, Paul, et al. "Social implications of the Internet." Annual review of sociology 27.1 (2001): 307-336.

rather are multiply caused by the economic, legal, and policy decisions of various nations in which social media plays an active part.[60]

Gurevitch, Coleman, and Blumler (2009) explored political communication as it is affected by changing media landscapes. They held that many of the trends of television media such as its emphasis on the visual aspects of news have persisted into the internet age, but that others, like television's broadcast-centered model of presentation, have necessarily been constrained.[61] They believed that the internet would create an evermore instantaneous feedback loop capable of constricting the length and sensationalizing the content of media messages.[62] The internet, they held, would have conflicting effects on political discourse to the extent that it will allow more participation than ever before, but that participation will be marked by content of brief and theatrical rather than substantive nature.[63]

(1) Social functions of internet communication

The information functions of the internet also include social functions, as the internet is a hub for online forums, discussion boards, and news media aggregates. Social media hubs like Facebook aggregate individuals' social life and news media into a single platform. Shah et al (2001) analyzed the internet's role in individuals' genera-

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[60] DiMaggio, Paul, et al. "Social implications of the Internet." Annual review of sociology 27.1 (2001): 307-336.

[61] Gurevitch, Michael, Stephen Coleman, and Jay G. Blumler. "Political communication—Old and new media relationships." The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 625.1 (2009): 164-181.

[62]

[63] Gurevitch, Michael, Stephen Coleman, and Jay G. Blumler. "Political communication—Old and new media relationships." The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 625.1 (2009): 164-181.

tion of social capital. In order to study this, they considered internet use through the lens of individual motivations in order to highlight differences between types of internet use. Through an analysis of the DDB's 1999 lifestyle study, they found users' employment of the internet for social purposes to be positively correlated with social capital, whereas more recreational uses of technology were found to negatively correlate with social capital.[64] Shah et al importantly held that while the internet can indeed be a means of generating social capital, the adoption of new media for social gain is not a singularity but rather the norm in the history of technological advancement.[65]

(2) Political participation

Xenos and Moy (2007) examined the effects of the role of the internet with respect to political and civil engagement within a changing media landscape. They found that internet use directly influences information acquisition, but political and civic engagement are contingent effects of internet use.[66] Through this lens, they advocated that importantly, we must study the internet not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a deeply complex one with numerous notable externalities.

Tolbert and Ramona (2003) observed the role of the internet as an information machine. They held that since it increases voter information about elections, we should

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[64] Shah, V. Nojin Kwak, R. Lance Holbert, Dhavan. "Connecting" and "Disconnecting" With Civic Life: Patterns of Internet Use and the Production of Social Capital." Political Communication 18.2 (2001): 141-62.

[65] Shah, V. Nojin Kwak, R. Lance Holbert, Dhavan. "Connecting" and "Disconnecting" With Civic Life: Patterns of Internet Use and the Production of Social Capital." Political Communication 18.2 (2001): 141-62.

[66] Xenos, Michael, and Patricia Moy. "Direct and differential effects of the Internet on political and civic engagement." Journal of communication 57.4 (2007): 704-718.

expect political participation to increase.[67] In accordance with survey data, they found that citizens with internet access were far more likely to report having voted in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. Findings held that internet access increased the probability of voting by 12% among respondents.[68] In short, they concluded that their is a positive correlation between internet access and the likelihood that an individual votes.

Expanding on this research, Kenski and Stroud (2006) analyzed the intersection of internet usage and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation. Through the lens of the 2000 National Annenberg Survey, they focused on the interrelation between access to the internet and exposure to political information. Their research found that political efficacy, knowledge, and participation are positively correlated with online exposure to political information.[69] These associations persisted even when accounting for the various political interests, party affiliation and the strength of that affiliation, and exposure to other forms of political media.[70]

Though considering the speculative research of the last section is valuable, it is also important to mention work that deals directly with the resultant effects of the rise of social media. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) considered the ways in which social media allows people to differently participate in political protest. In short, they note that social

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[67] Tolbert, Caroline J., and Ramona S. Mcneal. "Unraveling the Effects of the Internet on Political Participation?" Political Research Quarterly 56.2 (2003): 175-85.

[68] Tolbert, Caroline J., and Ramona S. Mcneal. "Unraveling the Effects of the Internet on Political Participation?" Political Research Quarterly 56.2 (2003): 175-85.

[69] Kenski, Kate, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. "Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation." Journal of broadcasting & electronic media 50.2 (2006): 173-192.

[70] Kenski, Kate, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. "Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation." Journal of broadcasting & electronic media 50.2 (2006): 173-192.

media outlets like Facebook provide sources of information that were uncontrollable by strict information regimes. It is precisely that sort of information, they held, that played crucial roles in citizens' decisions to participate in protests.[71] They highlighted that people learned about the Egypt protests through, in large part, Facebook.[72] That is, their findings suggest that controlling for all other things, social media participation greatly increased the likelihood of political participation.

The internet also allows candidates for political office to participate in the political process like never before. Rachel Gong's case study of the impact of blogging on the 2008 Malaysian general election delved into the social processes surrounding the internet's impact on politics. Gong contended that in instances in which internet accessibility is broadened, that very broadening tends to significantly benefit opposition candidates, as blogging offers chances to voice opinions not afforded them by state-controlled media.[73] Specifically, she held that candidates who blog are seven times more likely to win elections compared to candidates that do not.[74] Finally, she used anecdotal evidence to suggest that blogs might have gains not only in political networks, but also in interpersonal ones.

(3) Destabilization of institutions

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[71] Tufekci, Zeynep, and Christopher Wilson. "Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square." Journal of Communication 62.2 (2012): 363-379.

[72] Tufekci, Zeynep, and Christopher Wilson. "Social media and the decision to participate in political protest: Observations from Tahrir Square." Journal of Communication 62.2 (2012): 363-379.

[73] Gong, Rachel. "Internet Politics and State Media Control: Candidate Weblogs in Malaysia." Sociological Perspectives, vol. 54, no. 3, 2011, pp. 307–328.

[74] Gong, Rachel. "Internet Politics and State Media Control: Candidate Weblogs in Malaysia." Sociological Perspectives, vol. 54, no. 3, 2011, pp. 307–328.

Consistently, the literature refers imprecisely to a "destabilization of political institutions" brought on by new forms of media. But what, exactly, might this mean? Bryant and Miron (2004) delved into just how political institutions are destabilized by mass media communication. One prime example of this is unfolding events, during which reporters often appear as "blithering idiots trying to describe and explain something that no longer exists."[75] The reasons posited for this include the drastic changes in the form, content, and substance of mass media, due largely to the emergence of interactive media brought on by the internet.[76] Further, their research posited that this newly interactive nature of online news media pressures conventional media into forgoing substance for entertainment, a trend which further destabilizes the traditionally-stable credibility of media institutions.[77]

These positions are corroborated Dahlgren (2005), who provided a bird's-eye view of the ways in which the internet interacts with political communication. His framework drew from the three main analytic approaches to understanding the interaction of the internet and political discourse more broadly. Dahlgren considered the role of the internet as being primarily concerned with the destabilization of longstanding political communication systems, to the extent that it amplified voices from areas other

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[75] Bryant, Jennings, and Dorina Miron. "Theory and research in mass communication." Journal of communication 54.4 (2004): 662-704.

[76] Bryant, Jennings, and Dorina Miron. "Theory and research in mass communication." Journal of communication 54.4 (2004): 662-704.

[77] Bryant, Jennings, and Dorina Miron. "Theory and research in mass communication." Journal of communication 54.4 (2004): 662-704.

than traditional news media outlets.[78] In Dahlgren's view, the internet both enters into and contributes to the destabilization of news media outlets.[79]

Uslaner (2004) considered the question of whether or the internet promotes or degrades social and civic trust. Evaluating data from the Pew Center for the Internet and American Life, his findings supported the idea that internet users have broader social networks than non-internet users.[80] Importantly, though, internet users overwhelmingly interact with individuals that they know from personal interactions in their daily lives.[81] He found that internet users distrust strangers at levels on par with people who do not engage in internet use.[82] That said, people who normally exhibit high levels of social trust are more likely to trust strangers on the internet.[83] Thus, Uslaner concluded that the internet has little effect on the social trust of its participants, but rather that when online, people merely exhibit existing levels of social trust or mistrust.

Bennett and Iyengar (2008) explored the rapid expansion of discussion networks on social media and their ability to connect individuals who were unable to previously network. They found that social media created information channels that were both

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[78] Dahlgren, Peter. "The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation." Political communication 22.2 (2005): 147-162.

[79] Dahlgren, Peter. "The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation." Political communication 22.2 (2005): 147-162.

[80] Uslaner, Eric M. "Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet." Political Communication 21.2 (2004): 223-42.

[81] Uslaner, Eric M. "Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet." Political Communication 21.2 (2004): 223-42.

[82] Uslaner, Eric M. "Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet." Political Communication 21.2 (2004): 223-42.

[83] Uslaner, Eric M. "Trust, Civic Engagement, and the Internet." Political Communication 21.2 (2004): 223-42.

more proliferated and individualized than previous networks allowed for.[84] Further, they

held that this proliferation and individualization are due to a paradigm shift in media

models.[85] Previously, media was consumed through very few information channels that

were promulgated through a small set of mass media outlets. According to Bennett

and Iyengar, the traditional model described above has been replaced by media in

which far more individuals are allowed to participate in the promulgation of information,

thus destabilizing the cohesion of media narratives.[86]

It is not merely cohesion, though, that is destabilized by the proliferation of new

media models brought on by social media. Though the expansion of the public square

is largely thought to be positive, it does have drawbacks that destabilize the legitimacy

of news media. McPherson (2015) analyzed the ways in which the expansion of partic-

ipants in political communication due to technology has resulted in a crisis of credibili-

ty. She considered an instance in 2014 in which a viral video purporting to represent

the Syrian crisis was found to have actually been filmed privately in Malta years prior.[87]

This sort of phenomenon, according to McPherson, presents issues of credibility to

new forms of media. Further, she contends, it presents a bit of a paradox: expanding

networks to include more people makes media more democratic than ever before,

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[84] Bennett, W. Lance, and Shanto Iyengar. "A new era of minimal effects? The changing founda-
tions of political communication." Journal of Communication 58.4 (2008): 707-731.

[85] Bennett, W. Lance, and Shanto Iyengar. "A new era of minimal effects? The changing founda-
tions of political communication." Journal of Communication 58.4 (2008): 707-731.

[86] Bennett, W. Lance, and Shanto Iyengar. "A new era of minimal effects? The changing founda-
tions of political communication." Journal of Communication 58.4 (2008): 707-731.

[87] McPherson, E., 2015. Digital Human Rights Reporting by Civilian Witnesses: Surmounting
the Verification Barrier. In R. A. Lind, ed. Producing Theory in a Digital World 2.0: The Intersec-
tion of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publish-
ing, pp. 193–209.

while the decreased credibility due to that very expansion serves to undermine the integrity of the information flows on which society is based.[88]

(4) Homogeneity of online discussion networks

On the homogeneity of discussion networks, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) addressed a common question within literature on the sociology of political communication: namely, does online communication lend itself to exposure to dissenting political views? They analyzed this question through national survey data completed by American citizens who regularly participate in online discussion forums like social media. They found that the areas in which people are exposed to the most disagreement are forums in which politics is an occasional topic, but not the driving force or primary reason for the existence of the space.[89] Implications abound. First, it implies that online venues designed specifically to achieve the end of facilitating political communication tend to result in more ideologically homogenous discussions than other venues. Second, it suggests that the internet can provide exposure to dissenting political views, but mainly through indirect and unintentional associations. Finally, this research suggests that one of the trademark of political communication is that often, the ways in which we perceive our behavior do not align with the ways that we do, in fact, behave. This final trend is supported throughout the literature and sociological literature more broad-

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[88] McPherson, E., 2015. Digital Human Rights Reporting by Civilian Witnesses: Surmounting the Verification Barrier. In R. A. Lind, ed. Producing Theory in a Digital World 2.0: The Intersection of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, pp. 193–209.

[89] Wojcieszak, Magdalena E., and Diana C. Mutz. "Online groups and political discourse: Do online discussion spaces facilitate exposure to political disagreement?." Journal of communication 59.1 (2009): 40-56.

ly, to the extent that it evidences how unskilled we are at self-assessment of our be-

haviors and their intentional and unintentional effects.

(5) Implications for future political communication

Castells (2007) considered the interrelationship between communication and

power relationships in the technological sense. It analyzed the network society de-

scribed elsewhere in sociological literature as Habermasian. Castells argued that online

media outlets have become the very social space where power is communicated and

deliberated on.[90] It held that there exists a casual relationship between politics, media

politics, the politics of scandal, and debates over political legitimacy.[91] It noted that

given an increase in internet participation and wireless communication networks, new

forms of politics and social movements are more capable of affecting change in the po-

litical sphere.[92] Further, it contended that mass media and old communication net-

works are beginning to converge. The result of this, he concluded, is a historic shift

from institutionally-driven communication to a communication space dominated by

new forms of mass media communication such as social media.[93]

Craig Calhoun (1988) framed the expansion of media channels of political com-

munication in terms of its impact on populism. Calhoun held that changes in the pat-

tern of communication have fundamentally altered and expanded the groups of people

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[90] Castells, Manuel. Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society. International Journal of Communication, [S.l.], v. 1, p. 29, feb. 2007.

[91] Castells, Manuel. Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society. International Journal of Communication, [S.l.], v. 1, p. 29, feb. 2007.

[92] Castells, Manuel. Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society. International Journal of Communication, [S.l.], v. 1, p. 29, feb. 2007.

[93] Castells, Manuel. Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society. International Journal of Communication, [S.l.], v. 1, p. 29, feb. 2007.

included in the levers of democracy.[94] Further, he described this alteration as a scale that gave evermore influences to the voices of individual actors, at the expense of the power of mass media institutions.[95] Lance Bennett 's (1998) work concurs with Calhoun, to the extent that it also predicted the expansion of media in evermore personalized ways. He thought that this would function to destabilize institutions such as political parties and mass media.[96] He believed that a consequence of this destabilization would be evermore inclusive channels for participation in political discourse that would collapse into populism.[97]

Furthering research on the expansion of media channels, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) believed that we now exist in what they called the "third age" of media communication.[98] This age, they held, is characterized by media abundance, populism, and heightened competitive pressures of conventional media to justify its existence.[99]

Scholars like Bruce Bimber (1998) focused not just on the democratization of media participation, but also on its ramifications on media content. He believed that the internet would contribute to the fragmentation of interest-based group politics and

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[94] Calhoun, Craig. "Populist politics, communications media and large scale societal integration." Sociological theory (1988): 219-241.

[95] Calhoun, Craig. "Populist politics, communications media and large scale societal integration." Sociological theory (1988): 219-241.

[96] Bennett, W. Lance. "The Uncivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics." PS: Political Science & Politics 31.4 (1998): 740.

[97] Bennett, W. Lance. "The Uncivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics." PS: Political Science & Politics 31.4 (1998): 740.

[98] Blumler, Jay G., and Dennis Kavanagh. "The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features." Political Communication 16.3 (1999): 209-30.

[99] Blumler, Jay G., and Dennis Kavanagh. "The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features." Political Communication 16.3 (1999): 209-30.

shift discourse in the direction of more fluid, issue-based group politics.[100] Bimber

viewed this not as a contradiction of commonly held narratives about populism, but

rather as an accelerated form of them capable of eroding the role of institutions in so-

ciety.[101]

    Dahlgren (2005) highlighted positive consequences that the internet has had on

political discourse, such as the extent to which it "extends and pluralizes the public

sphere."[102] Castells (2008) concurred, predicting that over the next decade, news

forms of communication such as social media would result in the dissemination of in-

formation by more inputs and through more channels, resulting in the increase of politi-

cal participation and the further complication of political communication networks.[103]

    Having considered the research above, trends emerge. It appears that the inter-

net's impacts on news media are far reaching to the extent that it can serve as a venue

for social gain and increased political participation. Further, though, it also functions as

a de-stabilizer of traditional news media structures, to the extent that it democratizes

the public square in ways that were previously impossible.

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[100] Bimber, Bruce. "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism." Polity 31.1 (1998): 133-60.

[101] Bimber, Bruce. "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism." Polity 31.1 (1998): 133-60.

[102] Dahlgren, Peter. "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation." Political Communication 22.2 (2005): 147-62.

[103] Castells, Manuel. "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 616.1 (2008): 78-93.

IV. Discussion

There is debate as to whether or not the net effects of social media on political discourse are positive or negative. Shelley Boulianne's 2009 meta-analysis of studies surrounding the internet's relationship with political communication, after examining 166 effects as analyzed through 38 studies of the internet's role in political communication, argues that the internet is having neither a largely positive nor largely negative impact on political engagement.[104] Rather, she believes, the internet is merely exacerbating longstanding trends of political communication.[105] That is, Boulianne concludes that the internet is a new vehicle for political communication, not a revolutionary force on it.

As this thesis is intended to describe and explain rather than normatively advocate any side of such a debate, any further supposition must be speculative in nature. But to the extent that we can understand online political communication not as a paradigm shift, but a potent exacerbation of previously existing trends, further discussion might prove useful to the end of identifying tensions within the literatures discussed thus far. This section will begin by highlighting three "pressure points" within the literatures I have surveyed that implicate future research: (1) the potential increase in network homogeneity due to social media, (2) the transmission of expertise in the social media age, and (3) news media's credibility problem, as fostered by new forms of media. Necessarily, these pressures contribute to- and are exacerbated by- one another. Thus, the final portion of this section will be a discussion of potential ways in which

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[104] Boulianne, Shelley. "Does Internet Use Affect Engagement? A Meta-Analysis of Research." Political Communication 26.2 (2009): 193-211.

[105] Boulianne, Shelley. "Does Internet use affect engagement? A meta-analysis of research." Political communication 26.2 (2009): 193-211.

they interact. Importantly, any such discussion must be speculative in nature. That said, I do hope that my treatment of their potential interactions will prove useful to the end of identifying fruitful intersections for future research.

A. Network homogeneity

Mutz (2001) speculated that discussant networks tend to be far more homogenous than news media agendas.[106] This was, she believed, because news media outlets need to apply to vast swaths of the population in order to satisfy the pressure placed by ratings expectations. Such a position relies on the supposedly impersonal nature of news media- that is, news media has less of a vested interest in getting along with specific individuals, and thus caters messages to broader audiences than interpersonal discussion networks can allow or account for.

As early as 1996, scholars like Negroponte were wary of homogeneity within political discussion networks increasing in the internet age.[107] If the MIT media lab data from Twitter use during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Campaign is any indication, social media has provided a platform that permits the existence of alarmingly dense discussion networks.[108] The Pew Research Center's State of the Media 2016 reveals that 31 percent of social media users believe that the news posted by their friends or family presents diverse opinions, and 35 percent believe posts from the same group are ho-

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[106] Mutz, Diana C. "Facilitating Communication across Lines of Political Difference: The Role of Mass Media." American Political Science Review 95.1 (2001): 97-114.

[107] Negroponte, Nicholas. Being digital. Vintage, 1996.

[108] https://www.media.mit.edu/articles/parallel-narratives-clinton-and-trump-supporters-really-don-t-listen-to-each-other-on-twitter/

mogenous in content.[109] Of the latter subset, 69 percent would value to more opposing

views in their online social circle, and while 30 percent are content with

homogeneity.[110] Bind all of this with mounting evidence that we are massively unskilled

at self-assessment, and it appears safe to say that discussion network homogeneity is

a characteristic of political discourse in the social media era.

Though any theory of *why* such networks have arisen must be speculative, find-

ings from the literature on moral psychology may shed light on how such homogenous

discussion networks have arisen. Huckfeldt, Johnson and Sprague (2002) found that

the influence of any message is dependent on the context of messages previously

voiced within a given network.[111] Thus, discussion networks may be subject to a

"snowball effect" of similar messages, especially in the ever-increasing absence of dis-

senting voices.

Within these bounds, it appears that particular kinds of messages would be

more effective at creating homogenous networks than others. Specifically, research

suggests that threat both tightens in-group boundaries and increases political partici-

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[109] https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf

[110] https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf

[111] Huckfeldt, Robert, Paul E. Johnson, and John Sprague. "Political environments, political dynamics, and the survival of disagreement." The Journal of Politics 64.1 (2002): 1-21.

pation.[112][113] Threat promotes convergence of identities and, further, the less diverse the identities with in a group are, the lower tolerance for out-groups will be.[114] Finally, evidence suggests that personal, anecdotal experiences highly influence the political views of citizens.[115]

These things in mind, it seems likely that any interface that permits the mass promulgation of threat to specific audiences, provides a forum for anecdotal experiences, and allows people to control who their online neighbors are is an interface primed to bring about the rise of homogenous discussion networks.

Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook meet each of these criteria. Their widespread use places pressure on previous literature concerning network homogeneity. It lends to mounting evidence that the "neighborhood view" of political discourse discussed in the moral psychology literature is, at best, in need of review in the social media age.

Another area that the advent of social media places pressure on previous literature is the transmission of expertise in political discussion networks. Prior research has suggested that political efficacy, knowledge, and participation are positively correlated

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[112] Levine, Robert A., and Donald T. Campbell. "Ethnocentrism: Theories of conflict, ethnic attitudes and group conflict." New York: Wiley. 242 Social identity: international perspectives (1972): 271-299.

[113] Leach, Colin Wayne, Aarti Iyer, and Anne Pedersen. "Anger and guilt about ingroup advantage explain the willingness for political action." Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 32.9 (2006): 1232-1245.

[114] Roccas, Sonia, and Marilynn B. Brewer. "Social identity complexity." Personality and Social Psychology Review 6.2 (2002): 88-106.

[115] Walsh, Katherine Cramer, and K. Cramer. "Talking about race: Community dialogues and the politics of disagreement." (2007).

with online exposure to political information.[116] Huckfeldt (2001) held that discussants were fairly adept at evaluating who is an expert and who is not.[117] Finally, prior research held that expert voices are heeded because they speak, and are listened to, more often, not because discussants weigh their views more heavily.[118]

These things leave open the possibility that an interface on which expert and non-expert discussants are given equal time could stultify the transmission of expertise by saturating discussants with non-expert opinions. I suspect that social media exacerbates this trend, due to the horizontal nature of its presentation. That is, platforms like Facebook, through their "news feed" structures, place the opinions of uneducated peers and Noam Chomsky on a level playing field. What's more, expert opinions are often linked to articles, thus requiring intentional effort to access. Not only would such an interface destabilize the ways in which expertise has traditionally been transmitted, it would also place pressure on previous research such as Huckfeldt's 2001 study evaluating discussants' ability to identify experts. In this way, the widespread use of social media warrants new research evaluating individuals' abilities to identify experts.

Finally, the rise of highly individualized social media potentially pressures the common narrative that news media must remain objective in order to be valued by broad audiences. As McPherson (2015) highlighted, social media has paradoxical effects on media credibility to the extent that while it democratizes the construction and

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[116] Kenski, Kate, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. "Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation." Journal of broadcasting & electronic media 50.2 (2006): 173-192.

[117] Huckfeldt, Robert. "The social communication of political expertise." American Journal of Political Science (2001): 425-438.

[118] Huckfeldt, R. Robert, and John Sprague. Citizens, politics and social communication: Information and influence in an election campaign. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

dissemination of news, that very expansion might undermine the integrity of the information flows on which news media has been traditionally based.[119] Further, Bryant and Miron's research posited that this newly interactive nature of online news media pressures conventional media into forgoing substance for entertainment, a trend which further destabilizes the traditionally-stable credibility of media institutions.[120] It may well be the case that, as Bouza held, the democratization of discourse will serve to sensationalize media content, further destabilizing the credibility of news media institutions.[121] Findings such as these place pressure on conventional narratives that maintain media's objectivity and credibility.

Importantly, these pressures are multiply caused and their effects are often interrelated. For example, a rise in network homogeneity and a destabilization of expertise, taken together, might place pressure on Kenski and Stroud's 2006 study that found positive correlations between internet usage and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation.[122] The sensationalism of media content might well, as Bimber (1998) believed, contribute to interest-based group politics that foster homogenous networks. A decreased sense of trust in the credibility of media might well contribute to the crisis of

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[119] McPherson, E., 2015. Digital Human Rights Reporting by Civilian Witnesses: Surmounting the Verification Barrier. In R. A. Lind, ed. Produsing Theory in a Digital World 2.0: The Intersection of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, pp. 193–209.

[120] Bryant, Jennings, and Dorina Miron. "Theory and research in mass communication." Journal of communication 54.4 (2004): 662-704.

[121] Bouza F. The impact area of political communication: citizenship faced with public discourse. International Review Of Sociology [serial online]. July 2004;14(2):245-259.

[122] Kenski, Kate, and Natalie Jomini Stroud. "Connections between Internet use and political efficacy, knowledge, and participation." Journal of broadcasting & electronic media 50.2 (2006): 173-192.

expertise. Of course, the pressures placed on previous literature by social media are not limited to ones that I have noted, nor are they conclusive evidence that existing literature is incorrect. They do, however, point to a need for future investigation in their respective domains.

The pressures I have identified are similar in kind, to the extent that they suggest that new forms of political media have not reoriented the psychology of news media consumption, but rather further revealed and exacerbated existing trends. Past presenting a need for future research, they also have implications for policymakers.

The health of any representative democracy, in consequential ways, rests on the idea of an informed public, one that invests time consulting data and researching candidates in order to cast votes that reflect that which they value and have reason to value. I believe that the pressures identified in this thesis are similar in kind to the extent that they concern ways that the idea of an informed public is increasingly debased in the online era.

Given the advent of both the twenty-four hour news cycle and social media, citizens have easier access to news than ever before. However, given the proliferation of media channels in the online era, the news that they receive is, arguably, less credible than news promulgated under more traditional media models. This implies that progressively, the question of whether not an informed public exists is becoming less important relative to another question: what does the increasingly politicized term *informed* mean?

The potential crisis of expertise brought on, in part, by social media has massive ramifications for the flow of political information. Combined with a destabilization of

longstanding political institutions and the creation of dense political discussion net-works in which ideological homogeneity thrives, the integrity of informed democratic participation is under pressure. This pressure will manifest in the processes of policy formation to the extent that it has the capability of affecting the type of messages that will successfully elect candidates. As ideological homogeneity thrives in discussion networks, it is not unreasonable to expect participants to increasingly expect candidates to represent the ideological purity reflected in discussion networks. In this way, one function of this pressure lies in its radicalizing power, to the extent that it potentially pushes partisan policy away from the center, thus impeding the path of compromise and contributing to political polarization.

Apart from the above implications, these tensions raise important questions for policy makers in the present. If the news media is a political institution, what responsibility do policymakers have to regulate its behavior? Should internet news policy delve into the realm of regulating content purporting to be objective? Does a healthy democracy depend on measures that protect a diversity of informed views? The pressures placed on political discourse by new forms of media that I have discussed, I hold, permit policy makers- impel them, even- to take such questions seriously.

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