Abstract

Scholars and commentators have debated whether lower-threshold forms of political engagement on social media should be treated as being conducive to higher-threshold modes of political participation or a diversion from them. Drawing on an original survey of a representative sample of Italians who discussed the 2013 election on Twitter, we demonstrate that the more respondents acquire political information via social media and express themselves politically on these platforms, the more they are likely to contact politicians via email, campaign for parties and candidates using social media, and attend offline events to which they were invited online. These results suggest that lower-threshold forms of political engagement on social media do not distract from higher-threshold activities, but are strongly associated with them.

Keywords: political expression, political participation, election campaigns, social media, Twitter, Italy

Political Expression and Action on Social Media: Exploring the Relationship between Lower- and Higher-Threshold Political Activities among Twitter Users in Italy

1. Introduction

Social media are an increasingly populated forum in which voters interact with politicians and express their views about public affairs. Some scholars emphasize the participatory potential of the "information exuberance" (Chadwick, 2009) that emerges on these platforms, whereas others dismiss it as "slacktivism", an irrelevant distraction from effective collective action. As Gladwell (2010, p. 49) put it, social media "makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact." We evaluate these competing claims by testing whether lower-threshold forms of political engagement – accessing political information and expressing political views on social media – are associated with higher-threshold modes of political action on and beyond the web. Alternatively, as the slacktivism hypothesis suggests, acquiring information and expressing oneself politically on social media may delude individuals into thinking that they are engaged whereas in reality they are not, thus subtracting valuable time and effort from more demanding political activities. We test hypotheses related to these relationships with data from a unique online survey of a representative sample of Italians who discussed the 2013 general election campaign on Twitter. We assess whether respondents' use of social media for political information and expression – which are relatively easy ways to engage politically on these platforms – are associated with increased probabilities that they participate in more demanding activities such as emailing politicians, campaigning for them on social media, and attending offline political events after receiving an online invitation. In contrast with the most critical views of new forms of political information and expression afforded by social media, we find positive and statistically significant associations between the lower-threshold and higher-threshold activities we tested. We also find that individuals who intensely use social media to both publish and read political messages, as well as those who post high amounts of messages while reading fewer, are the most likely to also engage

in higher-threshold political action. These findings suggest that, by enabling individuals to express their political views and to learn political news, social media can meaningfully contribute to political action.

2. Lower- and Higher-Threshold Political Engagement on Social Media

For almost two decades, scholars have investigated whether political participation is augmented or diminished by two main types of uses of the internet: as a passive source of information and as an interactive environment for self-expression.

As a source of political information, the internet was initially thought to merely reinforce existing participatory patterns and inequalities. For example, Bimber and Davis (2003) argued that the selective nature of the web made it unsuitable to deliver political information to uninterested citizens. Therefore, whatever effects information could have on engagement would only reach individuals who were already engaged. However, subsequent studies suggested mechanisms and conditions under which online information could result in increased political interest and participation. For instance, Lupia and Philpott (2005) found that individuals who visited political websites that they perceived as providing important information reported increased levels of political interest. Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005) showed that acquiring political information on the internet is associated with political discussion and online civic messaging, which are associated in turn with participation. Xenos and Moy (2007) demonstrated direct effects of online information on political knowledge and differential effects on participation moderated by political interest. More generally, as access to the internet increased among the U.S. population, studies found stronger correlations between internet use and participation over time (Boulianne, 2009). Social media may contribute distinctively to these patterns by facilitating fortuitous exposure to political information via weak ties (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011), which can be a first step in the direction of political activity even among uninvolved individuals. As argued by Chadwick (2009, p. 30), "Politics in Facebook goes to where people are, not where we would like them to be,"

which implies that political messages can potentially reach broader constituencies than the politically interested audiences of party or news websites. For instance, Gil De Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, and Rojas (2009) found a positive relationship between the consumption of political information on blogs and various forms of online and offline participation. Information received through social media may carry more weight than that acquired by other means as it comes from personal sources that the recipient knows and trusts. Thus, Bond et al. (2012) observed that exposure to Facebook posts indicating that friends and acquaintances had voted exerted small but statistically significant effects on the individual's likelihood of voting.

Besides functioning as sources of information, social media also facilitate self-expression. Although most models of political communication effects focus on message reception, Pingree (2007, p. 440) has argued that "communication can strongly affect message senders" before, during, and after individuals compose and release political messages. This is highly consistent with a social psychological perspective on attitudinal and behavioral commitment associated with self-perception theory (Cialdini, 2009). From the perspective of social identity theory, engaging in political discussion offline creates "contexts of understanding and the conditions under which the clarification of collective identity is more or less likely" (Walsh 2010, p. 54), which can have implications for participation insofar as collective identity strengthens motivations for political engagement (Fowler & Kam, 2007). A similar pattern may occur on social media, which expand opportunities for political expression (Chadwick, 2009) and thus provide an outlet for performing and negotiating social identity (Papacharissi, 2010). Some studies have suggested that online political expression can contribute to other forms of engagement. For instance, Rojas and Puig‐i‐Abril (2009) found that individuals who expressed themselves politically on digital media were also more likely to mobilize other people by different means, and that those mobilizers were in turn more likely to engage in other participatory acts. Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng (2014) show

that political expression mediates the relationship between social media news use and political participation both offline and online.

Underlying these lines of research is a debate about the nature and structure of online political engagement. Krueger (2002) argued that the boundaries between passive and active forms of political engagement have been blurred by the internet, and Gibson and Cantijoch (2013, p. 704) developed this approach by asking whether the internet can elevate "what were previously considered more passive and less participatory behaviors (i.e., news consumption and discussion)" to more active forms of involvement. On the basis of a factor analysis, they find that online participation is internally differentiated in four different domains: "e-party", which involves various forms of online volunteering; "e-targeted", such as contacting politicians on the web; "e-expressive", which comprises different modes of political discussion; and "e-news", which entails getting information through party and media websites (Gibson & Cantijoch 2013, p. 711). The authors also note that their models failed to include "hybrid participatory acts whereby online tools are used in support of offline participation", thus "bridging" the online and offline dimensions (p. 706). If we include these hybrid forms, which we refer to here as "e-bridge" activities, we have five different groups of activities, which together constitute the domain of web-based engagement; as suggested by Gibson and Cantijoch (2013), these also comprise specific sub-domains. The five dimensions can be conceptualized as entailing different degrees of effort and commitment, with political news consumption (e-news) and self-expression (e-expressive) presenting lower thresholds to individuals' motivations and resources than contacting or petitioning politicians (e-targeted), campaigning for parties and candidates (e-party), and using the internet to facilitate offline endeavors (e-bridge). Interestingly, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) found that, unlike e-party and e-targeted, e-news and e-expressive activities were independent from their offline equivalents, suggesting that the divide between participatory endeavors entailing higher and lower thresholds may be narrower on the internet than offline.

A contrasting viewpoint is offered by scholars and commentators who argue that the lower-threshold activities enabled by digital media cannot lead to more consequential, higher-threshold endeavors, and that online engagement very rarely translates offline. For example, Morozov (2011) argues that social media facilitate easy actions – such as liking a political statement or changing one's profile picture to support a cause – which he treats as more likely to make users feel good than to advance political goals. Casual engagement of this type is often characterized as "slacktivism", a term that stresses the absence of strong motivations (Skoric, 2012) and echoes negative characterizations of email-facilitated citizen participation as "plagiarized participation" (Klotz, 2007) and "clicktivism" (Shulman, 2009). Critics argue that slacktivists, while aspiring to political change, lack the commitment that is required to achieve it (Christensen, 2011). According to these views, the ease with which individuals can use social media for lower-threshold engagement (such as informing and expressing themselves politically) may foster the illusion of being politically active, thus distracting from more consequential higher-threshold participation. As summarized by Christensen (2011), critics of slacktivism argue that "political activities over the Internet could have detrimental effects on the overall levels of political engagement and especially the effectiveness of engagement in achieving stated political goals." In sum, the slacktivism critique contends that lower-threshold, less demanding forms of political engagement are unrelated with, or even impede, higher-threshold, more demanding ones (for a review, see Fuchs, 2013, Ch. 8).

Although the concept of slacktivism has become rather popular in public discussions about the internet, it has been contested for its excessively narrow focus, as it only addresses the immediate limitations of casual online political action without considering the broader context of which it is part. Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2012) suggest that, as the internet becomes ubiquitous in society, its implications should be understood as changes in the context for political organizing and engagement rather than in terms of specific uses of technology. Along these lines, Cammaerts (2012, p. 128) highlights that, even if clicktivism is often seen as insignificant, it "seems to resonate with many citizens who often fail to make time in their everyday lives for 'active' activism" and

can contribute to collective identity-building. A vast body of research has shown that online and offline, new and traditional forms of participation tend to overlap and reinforce each other rather than being mutually exclusive (e.g., Shah et al., 2005; Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013). Oser, Hooghe, and Marien (2013, p. 6) found that "online activists do not seem to be substituting online activities for offline ones but rather are incorporating online acts of participation along with offline activities." Far from replacing or diminishing higher-threshold activism, according to these studies, lower-threshold political activities on social media are closely associated with it.

Besides facilitating lower-threshold forms of engagement, social media enable users to adopt different strategies when it comes to talking and hearing others talk about politics. Unlike the mass media, which is a one-way channel of communication, social media allow individuals to both publish and read political messages in a networked environment. In face-to-face conversations, participants are presumed to both talk and listen, and studies of interpersonal political discussion have accordingly focused on its frequency, the size of the networks in which it occurs, and the homogeneity of such networks (see e.g. Eveland & Hively, 2009), but have not investigated citizens' differential inclinations to contribute or listen to political talk. By contrast, the semi-public character of most social media enables interested users to witness a broader variety of conversations and to achieve different types of balances between posting and reading about politics. Some individuals may choose to use these platforms to both distribute and receive political content, others may adopt a more unilateral approach by which they disseminate many messages while reading few, whereas others may prefer to be exposed to much content while publishing little, and still others may refrain from reading and posting political messages. The implications of these granular strategies made possible by social media have not yet been fully addressed by research.

3. Hypotheses and Research Question

Our study deals with the relationships between lower- and higher-threshold forms of political engagement through social media and beyond. In their classic study on political participation in the

United States, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995, p. 43) argue that political participation can be classified based on the costs it entails, defined as "what a particular form of participation requires of the activist in terms of the mix of resources of time, money, and skills." Based on a similar approach, Chadwick (2009), characterizes political activities on social media as low- and high-threshold. We develop these insights by distinguishing online political engagement as *lower-threshold* when the potential or actual costs associated with them are relatively small, and as *higher-threshold* when such costs are relatively high. As an example, simply discussing political issues demands less commitment than campaigning for a party or candidate—especially in a political system in which few people trust politicians, which is clearly the case in Italy.[1] Moreover, most of the critiques that treat lower-threshold activities as slacktivism are based on the premise that such activities do not target political authorities and do not engage government actors. By contrast, higher-threshold activities address political actors and have at least the intention to directly or indirectly affect the actions of political or governing authorities.

In this study, our independent variables all involve relatively passive and costless activities that are not directly targeted at politicians or government: acquiring political information on social media, expressing oneself politically online, and the balance between posting and reading political messages on social media. By contrast, our dependent variables involve relatively costly activities that are directed toward political actors and that aim to affect government at least indirectly: contacting politicians via email, campaigning for parties or candidates on social media, and attending offline political events after receiving an online invitation. Thus, consistent with our goal of exploring the relationships between lower- and higher-threshold forms of political action, all of our independent variables refer to lower-threshold activities while all our dependent variables measure higher-threshold activities.

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[1] According to a May 2013 Eurobaroemter survey, only 7% of Italians claim to trust political parties, while 87% do not. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index_en.cfm (accessed 22 August 2014).

Based on the theoretical debates and empirical findings summarized in the preceding paragraph, our hypotheses and research question address the associations between different types of lower- and higher-threshold political activities on social media. Our first hypothesis is that *acquiring political information on social media will be associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in higher-threshold online political activities (H1)*. Our second hypothesis is that *expressing oneself politically on social media will be associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in higher-threshold online political activities (H2)*. Finally, in order to better understand the association between specific approaches to political communication on social media (i.e., different balances between listening and talking) and higher-threshold activities, we address this research question: *Are people who engage in more posting (relative to reading) political activity on social media more or less likely to engage in higher-threshold political activities than persons who engage in less posting (relative to reading) political activity on social media (RQ1)?*

4. Context

Our study addresses political discussion on Twitter during the 2013 Italian general election. Internet diffusion in Italy is low by European standards (in 2013 just 58% of Italians had gone online in the previous three months, as compared to 76% of citizens from the European Union as a whole).[2] However, social media have become rather popular for political discussion in Italy: according to a 2012 Pew survey, 36% of Italians who are on social media use them to discuss politics, which puts Italy in second place among the Western democracies included in the study.[3] Italian Twitter users grew massively between 2010 and 2012, as total users per month went from 1.4 million in December 2010 to 3.3 million in October 2012.[4] Although Twitter is only a niche channel compared with television and Facebook (the most popular social network in Italy, with 23.2 million users), it is becoming an important part of the information ecosystem. During the 2013 campaign,

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[2] See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/information_society/data/main_tables (accessed 4 March 2014).
[3] See http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/12/12/social-networking-popular-across-globe/ (accessed 4 March 2014).
[4] See http://vincos.it/osservatorio-facebook/ (accessed 15 July 2014).

almost all party leaders and candidates developed a Twitter presence and the mass media often reported politicians' tweets and citizens' reactions to them. The election was characterized by the unexpected success of the Five Star Movement, which achieved 25% of the vote in its first appearance in a general election. Led by former comedian Beppe Grillo, who had the most popular blog and social media presence among Italian politicians, the party relied heavily on the internet for organization and communication (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013).

5. Data

Given that our hypotheses and research question focus on how individuals use social media for political purposes, we need valid and reliable measures of online political engagement among social media users. Political activities on social media can be studied in various ways. On one hand, scholars can use computer algorithms to analyze the massive amounts of data that social media users produce as part of their online interactions. Alternatively, researchers can employ classic methods of social inquiry to study representative samples of web 2.0 users by directly querying (via online or offline surveys) the authors of selected messages. Following this second strategy allows us to measure concepts that do not necessarily emerge from the content and transactions generated on social media and processed by algorithms (for example degree of interaction with non social media outlets and degree to which authors engage in high-threshold political activity online and offline). At the same time, statistical inference on such integrated data allows for the generalization of our findings to broader populations, to the extent that these are precisely identified. For instance, Bode and Dalrymple (forthcoming) surveyed Twitter users who followed U.S. candidates, and Bekafigo and McBride (2013) interviewed users who posted messages containing political keywords.

In this article, we combine the advantages of both methods – active queries via surveys and passive observation of social media usage – to analyze a large sample of Twitter users who posted at least one message containing a reference to one of the main political parties or their leaders during the 2013 Italian general election. We identified our population of Twitter users who

discussed Italian politics on the basis of politically relevant keywords (the names of the main

political parties and their leaders, and the topical hashtag for the election).[5] We queried Twitter's

Streaming API[6] between January 18 and February 28, 2013 (the vote was held on February 24-25)

and retrieved about 3 million tweets in Italian, posted by about 275,000 unique users;[7] this

constituted our sampling frame. In the last two weeks before the election we randomly selected

approximately 8,000 users who had posted at least one message containing our keywords and asked

if they would be willing to take a survey.[8] After the election, we randomly selected and contacted

27,000 more users between March 4 and April 2.[9] Furthermore, between March 20 and April 8 we

re-contacted 5,000 randomly selected users who had already been invited once to take the survey.

The survey was in the field until May 2. Because no statistically significant differences in key

variables (based on Chi-square and ANOVA F-tests) emerged between the pre- and post-electoral

interviews, we present the results in combined fashion. Users in our sample were contacted

individually via Twitter through an automated script that read as follows: "@[username] University

research on social media use: Would you like to participate? [link to the survey]."[10] Although these

messages are technically public, because they were addressed specifically to individual users we

had sampled,[11] no one else on Twitter could see them directly.[12] Therefore, we are fairly confident

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[5] The keywords were: Berlusconi, Bersani, Casini, Di Pietro, Grillo, Ingroia, Maroni, Monti, Vendola (leaders); IDV, Lega, M5S, PD, PDL, Rivoluzione Civile, Scelta Civica, SEL, UDC (parties), and #elezioni2013 (election hashtag).

[6] API stands for "Application Programming Interface" and is a set of instructions and protocols that enables users to access a web-based software application. Twitter's API (https://dev.twitter.com/) allows to retrieve public Twitter messages and "metadata" such as the user who posted them, date, location, language, and so forth.

[7] Given that (in October of 2012) there were approximately 3.3 million active Italian Twitter accounts, approximately 1 out of every 12 Italians who possessed a Twitter account in Italy chose to tweet something related to the elections that matched our sampling criteria.

[8] We thank Leticia Bode for sharing with us the code of the script that we used to contact individual users, as well as providing valuable information on her own experience with this survey method.

[9] The lists we randomly drew from our sampling frame before and after the election were of 25,000 and 32,000 users, respectively. However, technical issues caused some contacting failures, especially in the pre-electoral phase. Because such failures occurred on a random basis, the part of our sample that we managed to contact can be considered a random subset of our original samples.

[10] The Italian wording was: "Ricerca universitaria sull'uso dei social media: vuoi partecipare?". The fact that the invitation did not mention politics at all should in theory mitigate against bias in terms of political interest among those who chose to answer the survey.

[11] Controls based on IP addresses ensured that the survey could be answered only once from the same computer.

[12] The only conceivable exceptions are (a) users who followed our accounts (which had no followers) or (b) users who were searching tweets containing keywords included in our invitation message. Both are unlikely. Some of our addressees could, however, have shared the link to our survey with their contacts and so, in principle, some users

that the overwhelming majority of our respondents were invited specifically by us rather than encountering our survey by other means.

Our web-based questionnaire included 58 items measuring socio-demographic characteristics, political attitudes, online and offline political participation, use of digital and mass media for political information, and voting behavior.[13] On average, respondents took about 20 minutes to complete the survey. A total of 3,155 users accessed the questionnaire, 2,158 answered at least one question, and 1,493 answered at least half of the questions. Therefore, based on the definition of Response Rate 2 (RR2) by the American Association for Public Opinion Research, we estimate our response rate to be 4%. This is by no means a high figure, although it is not much lower than the high single-digit response rates that are increasingly common in telephone surveys.[14] In any case, we provide evidence suggesting that our respondents can be considered statistically representative of Italians who discussed politics on Twitter.

More specifically, we combined and compared information about our respondents and all the users we invited to take the survey; to do this we integrated our survey data with observations of Twitter activity. With regard to our sample of respondents, we know their answers to our survey questions, but – at least for the majority of them – we do not know their social media activities (such as how often they posted messages, how many accounts they followed, and the like) because selection into our survey was anonymous. With regard to all the users we invited to participate in our survey, we know their social media activities because Twitter usage is public and we can measure this behavior regardless of whether or not someone chose to take our survey; however we do not know how they would have answered our questions.[15]

outside of our sample may have taken the survey. In a follow-up study, we asked respondents whether they had received the invitation directly from us or indirectly through other people and found that 97% of respondents had received a direct personal invitation.

[13] A copy of the questionnaire will be publicly made available upon publication of this article.

[14] For instance, Pew reported average 9% response rates for its telephone surveys in 2012. See http://www.people-press.org/2012/05/15/assessing-the-representativeness-of-public-opinion-surveys/ (accessed August 21, 2014).

[15] For that matter, we can measure the Twitter behavior of our entire population of Italians who tweeted about the election, including those not selected to receive an invitation for our survey.

Approximately 40% of our survey respondents chose to provide us with their Twitter handle, so for this sub-sample we have both of these types of information: the answers to our survey questions *and* their behavior on Twitter. Thus, we can estimate how similar this sub-sample is to all the users we invited to participate in our survey (based on Twitter activity) and how similar they are to respondents who did not give us their Twitter handles (via the survey data). In addition, we employed a number of techniques developed by scholars to estimate characteristics of Twitter users such as gender, location, and political ideology.[16] This allows us to compare Twitter users who answered the survey with all those we contacted not just in terms of Twitter behavior, but also in terms of socio-demographic and political characteristics. Through this multi-step process, therefore, we can compare those who answered the survey and those that we invited in order to evaluate whether the former is representative of the latter. Because those invited to take the survey were selected randomly, this process should allow us to ensure that our sample is representative of Italians who tweeted about the 2013 election, and, to the extent that it is not, to reweight the data accordingly.

As shown in Vaccari et al. (2013), respondents who provided their Twitter usernames were very similar in terms of demographic characteristics to those who answered the survey but did not provide their Twitter usernames. When compared to all the users we asked to participate in the survey, respondents turned out to follow more politicians' accounts, to have posted many more tweets about the election (but these posts do not emphasize one particular party leader more than others), and to be slightly more left-leaning. To better ensure that our survey respondents are representative of all the users invited to take our surveys – and thus of the population of those who

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[16] Gender was estimated using a Naive Bayes classifier (Bird, Klein, & Loper, 2009) trained with a list of common Italian names and their gender, and then applied to the name of each Twitter user, as reported on their profile. We found that this technique is able to accurately classify the gender of 90% of Twitter users. Each user's location was identified by parsing the "location" field in each profile using the Data Science Toolkit geocoder (www.datasciencetoolkit.org), which turns text into a set of coordinates, which we then matched to an Italian region. We were able to identify the region in which each user lives in 60% of cases. Finally, ideology was measured using the "spatial following model" described in Barberá (2014), which estimates ideology based on the political actors and media outlets that each Twitter user decides to follow. We found that this method is able to classify with 82% accuracy the self-reported ideological positions (left-right) of respondents in our survey.

tweeted about these elections among which we randomly sampled those we contacted – we weight our analyses by gender, region, number of political accounts followed, and number of tweets posted that mentioned any party or leader. This approach is commonly adopted by survey researchers to ensure that sample margins match population margins in a set of key variables (Gelman & Hill, 2007, pp. 310-319). For those respondents who did not provide their Twitter usernames, we imputed five sets of values for the latter two variables using a Markov chain Monte Carlo method (Gelman & Hill, 2007, Ch. 25). We then computed five different sets of weights and ran multiple analyses using each of them, the results of which were then aggregated. Because we only weighted those cases for which we had information concerning all four variables, the total number of cases in our analyses is 1,408. Therefore, while we do not claim that our sample is representative of the whole Italian population, we do feel confident – when using the weighted analyses – that they are fairly representative of Italians who communicated about the 2013 election on Twitter, at least in so far as their online activity, gender, and region are concerned.

6. Measures and Models

We investigate the hypotheses and research question using two sets of multivariate logistic regression analyses with three different dependent variables[17] that measure whether respondents engaged in the following activities in the previous year:[18]

- Contacting politicians by email, which represents the "e-targeted" dimension in Gibson and Cantijoch's (2013) terminology.[19]

- Using social media to campaign for a candidate or a party, which represents the "e-party" dimension.[20]

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[17] Our main dependent and independent variables all involve self-reports. Although it would be extremely difficult to reliably assess the political activities we are studying in any other fashion, we recognize that, as is the case with all self-reported data, these variables are less than perfect measures of the underlying phenomena.

[18] These variables were part of a battery of 18 items, all introduced by the question "Over the past 12 months, did you…", and to which respondents could answer "Yes", "No", or "Don't remember". In our analyses, we treat "Yes" = 1, "No" = 0, and "Don't remember" as missing values.

[19] The question wording was: "send an email to a politician/party/political group?" 26% answered "Yes".

- Participating in offline political events after receiving an online invitation, which represents "e-bridge" activities that merge online and offline domains.[21]

We test H1 through a measure of the frequency with which respondents received political information through social media ("e-news").[22] To test H2, we employ a 5-item aggregate index of online activities by which individuals express their political views ("e-expressive"). The items are "publishing political news on social media", "discussing political issues on Facebook or Twitter", "discussing political issues on forums or blogs", "commenting on a politician's or political group's post on Facebook", and "spreading political satire on the web" (1 point for each activity, Cronbach's α=.65, $M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.46$).[23]

To answer RQ1, we measure the proportion[24] of social media messages that deal with politics posted by the respondents[25] and by the people in their social media networks.[26] We aimed to differentiate between respondents who (a) both post and read many political messages on social media, (b) post relatively many messages but read few, (c) read many messages but post few, and (d) both post and read few political messages. We employed as cutoff points the median values of the two variables measuring posting and reading political messages, and classified respondents as:

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[20] The question wording was: "encourage anyone to vote for a party or candidate by using social media?" 42% answered "Yes".

[21] The question wording was: "attend an offline event after receiving an online invitation to it?". 35% answered "Yes".

[22] The question wording was: "How often do you use these channels to get information on political issues you are interested in?" Channels tested were: "Newspapers; internet websites; social media; radio; magazines; television; discussions with other people". Response modes were: "Never; at least once a month; at least once a week; more than once a week; everyday; more than once a day". Websites and social media were the most popular, with 84% and 81% using them at least once a day, followed by television (51%), offline discussion (49%), radio (37%), newspapers (21%), and magazines (9%).

[23] The question wording and response categories were the same as for the dependent variables discussed above.

[24] Employing relative rather than absolute measures makes it easier for respondents to estimate the extent to which the social media contents they post and read are political. Moreover, individuals differ in the frequency with which they post and read social media messages in general, so that for someone who rarely publishes any type of content on these platforms, even a handful of posted political messages can be quite meaningful, whereas for someone who is constantly posting about many different topics, a few posts about politics may not comprise a very intense experience of political talk. Finally, comparing ratios of political messages posted and read is more appropriate than comparing absolute values, as the absolute number of messages (political or otherwise) that individuals read on social media is likely to be much greater than the absolute number of messages they post.

[25] The question wording was: "Thinking about everything you have posted recently on social networking sites, such as status updates, comments, or links to news stories — about how much of what you have posted is related to politics, political issues or the 2013 elections? (0-100 scale)." The mean value in our sample was 42.7 and the median was 40.

[26] The question wording was: "How about the people you are in contact with on social networking sites? How much of what they share and post is related to politics, political issues or the 2013 elections? (0-100 scale)." The mean value in our sample was 46.8 and the median was 45.

(a) those who were above both medians (32.8%); (b) those who were above the posting and below the reading median (13.6%); (c) those who were above the reading and below the posting median (16.4%); and (d) those who were below both medians (37.2%). We created dummy variables for (a), (b), and (c), and treat (d) as the reference category.[27]

[Table 1 about here]

As can be seen from Table 1, the variables required to test H1 and H2 and to answer RQ1 were not strongly correlated with each other. However, we present separate models to test our hypotheses (Model 1) and answer our research question (Model 2) because the substantive meanings of the independent variables required to test H1 (political information on social media) and H2 (online political expression) overlap to some degree with those of the variables involved in answering RQ1 (posting and reading political messages on social media). The models include control variables for socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, and income[28]), political attitudes (interest in politics, internal and external political efficacy[29]), and political information via television, newspapers, and radio. Because our sample only includes Twitter users who discussed politics during the election, results should not be generalized beyond this population. Nevertheless, studying these citizens allows us to investigate whether lower-threshold modes of political engagement enabled by social media, such as information and expression, are associated with higher-threshold political activities online, as well as clarifying the participatory implications of

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[27] This strategy results in the loss of some information, as in the proximity of the cutoff points individuals with relatively similar scores may be classified in different groups. To mitigate for the potential biases resulting from our classification, we tested two alternative classifications based on different cutoff points: the mean rather than the median values of the variables and the midway point in the scale (50). All the models we ran with these different treatments of the variables yielded identical conclusions – in terms of the direction and significance of the coefficients – to the models presented here, suggesting that the loss of information inherent in our classification does not systematically bias our multivariate results. See http://webpoleu.altervista.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Online-appendix.pdf for these statistical models.

[28] A number of our variables have missing data and, in particular, the one measuring income has 245 missing values. Rather than introducing bias through the use of listwise deletion (King, Honaker, Joseph, & Scheve, 2001), we instead mean-replace these missing values and add a dummy variable to the analysis identifying these cases. With this set-up, the coefficient on any given variable with missing data should be interpreted as the effect of that variable on our dependent variable for the cases for which we have observations of the independent variable in question; we thank Larry Bartels for suggesting this approach. The coefficients on the dummy variables identifying the missing cases – which are essentially meaningless because they are simply a function of whatever value we use to replace the missing observations – are not included in the tables (e.g., see Powell & Tucker, 2013).

[29] In Table 2, the coefficients represent disagreement with the sentences between quotation marks.

individuals' choices to be mostly posters, mostly readers, or both posters and readers of political messages on social media.

7. Findings

Table 2 reports the results of three pairs of models that consider, as dependent variables, three higher-threshold online political activities that exemplify "e-targeted" (emailing a politician), "e-party" (campaigning for parties on social media), and "e-bridge" (attending an offline event after receiving an online invitation). We follow Long and Freese's (2006) advice and report and discuss odds-radios rather than log-odds for ease of interpretation.[30] As explained in the previous section, the columns labeled "Model 1" present models testing H1 and H2, while the columns labeled "Model 2" present models answering RQ1.

[Table 2 about here]

Our first hypothesis predicts that acquiring political information on social media will be associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in higher-threshold online activities. As can be seen in Table 2, the odds that respondents who frequently received such information campaigned on social media for parties and candidates and attended offline political events after receiving an online invitation increased substantially and the associations were statistically significant. As an example, if we set all the variables to their median or modal values, including the variable measuring receiving political information on social media, then this hypothetical respondent we have constructed has a 73% probability to also campaign for parties and candidates on social media. By contrast, if we set the value of the variable measuring political information acquired on social media one standard deviation below the median, the predicted probability of campaigning for parties drops to 25%, whereas if we set the value one standard deviation above the median, the predicted probability increases to 91%. However, the association between political information on social media and

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[30] Complete models with all standard coefficients can be found at http://webpoleu.altervista.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Online-appendix.pdf.

emailing politicians is positive but not significant. In this model, age was strongly and positively associated with the dependent variable, suggesting that email as a form of contacting politicians is more appealing to older than younger generations. The strength of this association may explain why we failed to find a significant association between political information on social media and emailing politicians. H1 is thus supported for two out of three of our dependent variables.

Our second hypothesis predicts that expressing oneself politically on social media will be associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in various types of higher-threshold online political activities. As can be inferred from Table 2, we find strong empirical support for this hypothesis across all three dependent variables, as all associations are positive and statistically significant. The strength of these associations is also substantial: as an example, if we take the median or modal respondent on all other variables and also set the value of online expression at the median, then this hypothetical respondent has a 29% probability of attending an offline event after receiving an online invitation. Setting the value of online expression one standard deviation below the median makes the probability drop to 11%, while raising the value of online expression one standard deviation above the median increases the probability to attend an offline event to 68%. H2 is thus rather strongly supported for all of our dependent variables.

Our research question aims to establish whether individuals who engage in more political posting (relative to reading) on social media are more or less likely to participate in higher-threshold political activities than those who engage in less political posting (relative to reading). The coefficients in Table 2 indicate that, compared with respondents in the reference category who both post and read fewer political messages than the median, both the group (a) that posts and reads more than the median and the group (b) that posts more but reads less than the median are more likely to email politicians, campaign on social media,[31] and attend offline events after learning about them online. All these associations are statistically significant. By contrast, the odds of high-

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[31] We note that posting political messages on social media is conceptually distinct from campaigning for parties or candidates on these platforms. Users can post political messages without advocating for a party, and they can campaign for a party without posting messages—for instance, by changing their profile information or picture.

threshold participation for the group (c) that reads more but posts less than the median decrease mildly, but not significantly, relative to those for the group (d) that posts and reads below the median. To ensure that the odds for groups (a) and (b) increase significantly compared to group (c) as well, we re-ran the models with group (c) as the reference category and still found positive and significant associations for groups (a) and (b), and positive but not significant associations for group (d). To illustrate how strong these associations are, if we set the values of all other variables to their mode or median, the predicted probability of emailing a politician is 37% for respondents who have high values on both posting and reading political messages on social media (group a), 38% for those who have high values on posting and low values on reading (group b), but it drops to 16% among respondents who read more but post fewer messages than the median (group c) and to 11% among those who both read and post less than the median (group d). Thus, the answer to our RQ1 is that posting many messages on social media, both with and without reading many others, is associated with higher-threshold political activity, but reading many messages without posting as many is not.

8. Discussion

Our findings suggest that activities enabled by social media generally thought of as lower-threshold forms of political engagement are positively associated with higher-threshold political activities that occur both online and offline. We tested two specific forms of lower-threshold engagement – getting political information and expressing oneself politically – and found support for both the first and, especially, the second type of activity as potential precursors to more demanding forms of participation. Thus, communicating about politics on social media is likely to be accompanied by more demanding action, whether it is contacting politicians, campaigning for them, or attending events. Our findings concerning political information confirm earlier studies of the implications of political news acquired via mass and digital media, and our findings concerning political expression echo those of more recent research suggesting that social media and other discursive online environments contribute a great deal to citizens' participatory repertoires. They are also consistent

with the argument that the very act of "being political" on social media – that is, sharing political content and opinions – facilitates other forms of political action in two possible ways. First, engaging in political discussions on social media may reveal to a given individual his or her own political preferences (of which s/he might not previously have been entirely aware), a possibility that is not unrealistic given the pervasiveness of social media in users' everyday lives and the ease with which individuals can be drawn into various types of conversations, including political ones, on these platforms. Secondly, being part of these political exchanges may increase users' beliefs in their own internal efficacy by demonstrating that they can indeed participate in the political process and this may give them the confidence needed to try other forms of political participation.

Higher-threshold online activism is most common among those individuals who use social media intensively to post political messages as well as those who, in addition to publishing high amounts of political content, are also heavily involved in reading other people's comments and viewpoints. By contrast, respondents who prefer to read rather than to post were substantially less likely to be active in other domains. These findings reinforce the idea that online political expression and engagement strengthen one another rather than being alternatives. Similar outcomes can be observed when frequent expression is matched with sustained exposure to other individuals' political postings, suggesting that inward-oriented flows of political communication enabled by social media are associated with higher-threshold forms of participation when they are matched with outward-oriented ones.

It is important to recognize that our data do not allow us to investigate the direction of the causal patterns underlying the associations that we observed. First, establishing causality would require the analysis of longitudinal or experimental rather than cross-sectional survey data. Secondly, we studied a specific population of individuals who posted at least one election-related message, and we cannot determine whether our findings can be generalized to other populations. Endogeneity is inevitable in our models and our data do not allow us to establish the direction of the causal relationships behind the associations we have identified; indeed, it is for this reason that our

hypotheses specifically predict associations, as opposed to causal effects. Moreover, as with any single-country study, our findings may also be affected by some specific systemic features of Italian politics and technology, discussed in section 4. However, we have no a priori reason to believe that the patterns we have identified among Italian Twitter users who discussed the 2013 elections would be absent in other political systems. For one thing, the socio-demographic and political characteristics of Italians who engage with politics online – relatively young, well-educated, and highly interested in politics – are similar to those of their Western counterparts (Vaccari, 2013). The most unique aspect of the Italian 2013 elections that needs to be considered is the success of the internet-enabled Five Star Movement. In our sample, 23% of respondents claimed to have voted for this party, on par with the 25% it achieved nationally, which suggests that our findings are not skewed by an overwhelming presence of Five Star online activists. The Italian electorate itself, however, may be somewhat unique because of the wide appeal of this web-based insurgent party.

Thus while we do not claim to have demonstrated a causal relationship, the results clearly hold out the possibility that political activity on social media could function more as a "gateway drug" leading to offline forms of political activity as opposed to simply a "slacktivist" alternative to such activity. In particular, our findings undermine popular pessimistic views that lower-threshold political talk on social media displaces citizens' time and energy from other forms of higher-threshold engagement, as well as skeptical perspectives suggesting that these forms of involvement are irrelevant. If learning and talking about politics on Twitter really distracted people from other opportunities to take action, we would have expected negative rather than positive correlations between lower- and higher-threshold endeavors. The positive correlations we found are empirically relevant, and politically consequential, regardless of whether our sample of respondents became more engaged because they talked about politics on social media or talked about politics on social media because they were active in politics. Moreover, our study of a subset of Twitter users confirms previous studies that have shown online political information and discussion to be

conducive to participation as well as more recent studies that emphasize the role of self-expression – and its enhanced possibilities via social media –as a precursor to other types of engagement.

Finally, as suggested by Bimber et al. (2012), the ubiquity of digital media has changed the context for participation, and understanding the implications of this change for institutions, organizations, and citizens may be as important as disentangling specific causal patterns linking internet use with political behavior. Even if the associations we found depended solely on the fact that those who are already engaged in other types of political action also turn to social media rather than the other way around, this pattern still opens interesting possibilities for indirect mobilization processes. Citizens who engage in online political actions will also intensely communicate about those actions on social media, which may then lead the people in their online networks to learn about opportunities to engage and to become more motivated to participate. This two-step flow of engagement could not take place unless there was a strong link between information and expression on social media and participation in other types of activities, consistent with our main findings.

9. Conclusions

The health of democracies depends, among other things, on citizens' political participation. Our findings suggest that political information and self-expression on social media contribute to these qualities rather than endangering them. We evaluated whether lower-threshold forms of engagement enabled by social media are a form of "slacktivist" chatter unrelated to, and distracting from, other forms of higher-threshold involvement, and found that this does not seem to be the case, at least in our population of Twitter users who discussed the Italian 2013 election. On the contrary, higher levels of online political information and expression are associated with higher probabilities that individuals also email politicians, use social media to encourage others to vote for a party or candidate, and attend events after receiving an online invitation. We interpret these results as a strong encouragement to treat citizens' expression on social media as a substantial and potentially consequential mode of political engagement rather than a diversion from it. This conclusion is

reinforced by our findings that participation in higher-threshold activities was greater in those groups that were either very active as publishers of political messages or intensely involved in both the production and consumption of political content on the web 2.0. Digital citizenship is thus enhanced when individuals use social media in "write" and "read-write" modes rather than when they resort to "read-only" approaches whereby they expose themselves to political messages without contributing much to exchanges of ideas and information.

The evidence presented here suggests various lines of future inquiry. First, the content of citizens' political discussions and interactions on social media should be studied to determine whether observable acts of self-expression on these platforms corroborate the evidence from the self-reports that we presented. Second, comparative research is needed to assess the role of institutions and context in shaping political engagement on social media and their implications. Thirdly, more work is needed to disentangle the causal patterns and mechanisms behind the associations that we found. Fourth, we need to study the connections between citizens' political activities on and off the internet in a more systematic way, possibly combining qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry, in order to gauge the extent to which digital media are changing the context of important democratic endeavors as well as affecting specific modes of citizen information and participation. Finally, to the extent that social media use is increasing in all societies where it has been measured and that Twitter is only one of several such platforms, it is crucial to investigate whether our conclusions can be generalized to broader populations than the one we studied here—in which case the implications of social media for political engagement may turn out to be even more profound than we have shown here.

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Table 1 – Zero-order correlations among all independent and dependent variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1 Gender	-																		
2 Age	.11**	-																	
3 Education	-.02	.26**	-																
4 Income	.10**	.15**	.08**	-															
5 Efficacy 1	-.03	.03	.03	.00	-														
6 Efficacy 2	.01	.07*	.15**	.09**	.30**	-													
7 Efficacy 3	.10**	.07*	.12**	.07**	.14**	.11**	-												
8 Interest in politics	.16**	.14**	.20**	.12**	.17**	.16**	.31**	-											
9 Info newspapers	.05	.14**	.09**	.08**	.13**	.16**	.12**	.29**	-										
10 Info radio	.01	.24**	.06*	.09**	.08**	.07*	.06*	.17**	.26**	-									
11 Info television	-.04	.06*	-.03	.05	.03	.10**	.04	.17**	.29**	.26**	-								
12 Info social media	.01	.11**	.14**	.02	.08**	.05	.06*	.24**	.15**	.26**	.24**	-							
13 Online expression	.11**	.11**	.14**	-.00	.21**	.08**	.12**	.41**	.11**	.06*	.05	.28**	-						
14 High posting high reading	-.01	.14**	.03	-.03	.13**	.12**	.07*	.30**	.16**	.06	.11**	.15**	.27**	-					
15 High posting low reading	.09**	-.01	.05	.06*	.02	.00	.09**	.15**	.03	.04	.04	.03	.14**	-.28**	-				
16 Low posting high reading	-.18**	-.10**	.02	-.04	-.03	-.03	-.07*	-.18**	-.10**	-.03	-.05	-.05	-.13**	-.31**	-.18**	-			
17 Email politicians	.12**	.22**	.09**	.05	.11**	.12**	.14**	.29**	.11**	.09**	.03	.12**	.36**	.23**	.12**	-.16**	-		
18 SNS campaigning	.14**	.05	.09**	.04	.15**	.12**	.15**	.33**	.06*	.01	.09**	.19**	.43**	.25**	.16**	-.18**	.32**	-	
19 Offline event	.08**	.11**	.07*	.00	.22**	.12**	.11**	.32**	.19**	.07*	.04	.18**	.48**	.28**	.10**	-.17**	.38**	.36**	-

Note: cell entries are Pearson's R correlation coefficients. Variables number 1, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 are dichotomous and Pearson's point-biserial correlations were used.□
Variables number 12 and 13 entered only in Model 1. Variables number 14, 15 and 16 entered only in Model 2.
**p≤.01 *p≤.05

Table 2 – Estimated odds-ratios for engagement in different types of online political activities

DEPENDENT VARIABLES:	Emailing politicians		Campaigning on social media		Attend offline event after receiving online invitation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Political info from social media	1.344		3.093**		2.873**	
Online political expression	1.742**		2.073**		1.870**	
High posting, high reading (a)		2.358**		2.946**		2.928**
High posting, low reading (b)		2.377**		2.989**		2.197**
Low posting, high reading (c)		.707		.754		.812
Political info from newspapers	1.043	.940	.771	.696	2.609**	2.039**
Political info from radio	.887	.954	.508**	.578*	.912	.990
Political info from television	.735	.720	1.881*	1.709	.558*	.691
Interest in politics	7.138**	9.300**	5.056**	7.026**	6.845**	7.162**
"People don't have any say"	1.219	1.460	1.217	1.777**	2.617**	3.319**
"Public officials don't care"	1.773	1.505	1.841*	1.308	1.094	1.075
"Politics is too complicated"	1.165	1.129	1.460	1.329	.801	.818
Gender (male)	1.475*	1.538*	1.456*	1.616**	1.072	1.275
Age	14.901**	10.926**	.605	.796	1.752	2.043
Education	.830	1.212	1.112	2.305	.478	1.147
Income	1.248	.928	1.258	1.059	.863	.804
Intercept	.003**	.011**	.004**	.032**	.006**	.029**
N	1166	1221	1162	1220	1164	1216
Nagelkerke R^2	.289	.229	.370	.253	.335	.245
Log-likelihood	1107.1	1224.3	1222.0	1421.4	1213.9	1363.1

Note: cell entries are odds-ratios for the predicted outcomes. Dummy variable identifying missing observations for income omitted from table.

All variables apart from online political expression range from 0-1.

Coefficients for efficacy represent disagreement with statements in quotation marks.

**p≤.01 *p≤.05 (based on 99% and 95% confidence intervals for exp(b) coefficients)

Acknowledgments

About the authors

Cristian Vaccari is Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Bologna and Lecturer in Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. He studies political communication in comparative perspective. His latest book is *Digital Politics in Western Democracies: A Comparative Study* (Baltimore, 2013). E-mail: cristian.vaccari@rhul.ac.uk.

Augusto Valeriani is Assistant Professor in Media Sociology at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna (Italy). His research focuses on digital media and politics both in national and international contexts. He is the author of several articles and three monographs. His last book is *Twitter Factor* (Rome, 2011).

Pablo Barberá is a PhD student in the Department of Politics at New York University. His research interests encompass the areas of political behavior and electoral institutions, the use of new information and communication technologies in politics, and the electoral consequences of corruption scandals.

Rich Bonneau is an Associate Professor of Biology and Computer Science at NYU. His laboratory is focused on developing new methods for learning regulatory networks from genomics and systems biology datasats as well as new methods for dynamic analysis of social networks.

John T. Jost is Professor of Psychology and Politics at New York University. His research addresses stereotyping, prejudice, political ideology, and system justification theory. He has published over 120 journal articles and book chapters and four book volumes, including *Social and Psychological Bases of Ideology and System Justification* (Oxford, 2009).

Jonathan Nagler is Professor of Politics at New York University. He is a past president of the Society for Political Methodology, as well as an Inaugural Fellow of the Society for Political Methodology. Professor Nagler's research focuses on voting and elections, and he is a co-author of *Who Votes Now*? (Princeton, 2014).

Joshua A. Tucker is Professor of Politics and (by courtesy) Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, a co-Director of the NYU Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) laboratory (smapp.nyu.edu), a co-author of the award winning *Monkey Cage* blog at *The Washington Post*, and the author of *Regional Economic Voting* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).