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SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

Medios sociales y democracia 

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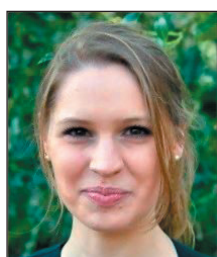
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Abstract

Slowly approaching the second quarter of the 21st century, research on social media and its effects over democracy has quickly permeated across various fields in social sciences, particularly political communication. Based on accumulated evidence in this strand of literature, this paper briefly summarizes several established research areas. First, it highlights how social media facilitates individuals' political expression. Second, it sheds light on how this enhanced communicative behavior has reinvented a more participatory society in democracy. Third, it examines social media's democratic deficit mechanisms in regards to stagnant political knowledge acquisition. Finally, the paper offers a theoretical explanation to this lack of knowledge acquisition through the lenses of the 'news-finds-me' perception theory. Overall, the present manuscript explains specific ways in which social media helps and hinders the advancement of healthy democracies, thereby also providing promising guidelines for future research.

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Keywords

Social media; Political expression; Political participation; Political knowledge; “News-finds-me” perception; NFM.

Resumen

Acercándonos ya al segundo cuarto del siglo XXI, la investigación en las redes sociales y sus efectos sobre la democracia ha permeado rápidamente en varios campos de las ciencias sociales, particularmente en la comunicación política. Basándonos en la evidencia acumulada en esta línea de bibliografía, este artículo resume brevemente varias áreas de investigación. Primero, destaca cómo los medios sociales facilitan la expresión política de los individuos. Segundo, arroja luz sobre cómo este comportamiento comunicativo mejorado ha revitalizado una sociedad más participativa en la democracia. En tercer lugar, examina los mecanismos de déficit democrático de las redes sociales en relación con la adquisición de conocimientos políticos. Finalmente, el artículo ofrece una explicación teórica a esa falta de adquisición de conocimiento a través de la teoría de la percepción “las noticias me encuentran”. En general, el presente manuscrito explica formas específicas en que las redes sociales ayudan u obstaculizan el avance de democracias saludables, proporcionando así pautas prometedoras para futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave

Medios de comunicación social; Redes sociales; Expresión política; Participación política; Conocimiento político; Percepción “las noticias me encuentran”.

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1. Social media and democracy

Research on social media has flourished in the past 15 years. Scholars have been interested in investigating positive as well as negative effects that social media might have for citizens’ daily life, as well as for society as a whole. Political communication in particular has focused on the effects of social media on political and civic participation (see for an overview: Boulianne, 2015; 2018). This paper centers on this area of research and elaborates on three major concepts that research has identified to be relevant when investigating the potential and/or threat of social media for democracy. These are, among others,

- political expression,
- political participation, and
- political learning.

“Social media provides citizens with opportunities to express themselves and openly share their ideas, opinions and viewpoints”

First, by connecting people across the world, social media provides citizens with opportunities to express themselves and openly share their ideas, opinions and viewpoints. In doing so, it allows information to get rapidly disseminated afar. Various platforms, networks and tools offer citizens a plentitude of ways to share information that is meaningful to them, ignoring social, cultural or geographical borders. Expression should be understood as ‘standalone communicative action’, independent from a discussion, for instance, as individuals may share their thoughts with low or no expectation of social engagement at all. They just want the world to know how they feel, and what they think. As such, one specific form of expression is sharing their thoughts

with others to express their political views. But why is political expression so important? And why it is so unique in the social media context? The paper elaborates on this issue and details how social media captures expressive behaviors that are unique and effective as opposed to offline political expression.

“It seems that social media has not fully fulfilled its potential when it comes to maintaining and reinvigorating an informed public opinion”

Second, the paper discusses how political expression can become a powerful antecedent of political engagement. Social media has changed the norms of participation as well as the ways in which citizens become engage with politics (i.e., logic of networked action, less institutionalized politics as opposed to more individual network action, based on citizens). In short, the paper seeks to explain under what conditions social media might facilitate these participatory political processes.

Third, the paper discusses whether or not a more participatory society, in part due to social media, equates with a more informed participatory society. That is a pending question and research in this area is still in its infancy. So far, it seems that social media has not fully fulfilled its potential when it comes to maintaining and reinvigorating an informed public opinion. In the light of this discussion, there are two opposing views,

- a) social media helps people to acquire necessary information, leading to political mobilization, or conversely,
- b) social media does not fulfill this political knowledge task, leading people to participate without deep political issues knowledge gain.

The paper offers a theoretical account to clarify the mechanisms between social media use and political learning, or a lack thereof: The “news-finds-me perception” (NFM).

2. Social media and political expression

Social media has the potential to foster democracy in various ways. One way is helping citizens to get exposed to news, either actively or incidentally, which has found to be positively related to political participation (Saldaña; McGregor; Gil de Zúñiga, 2015; Kim; Chen; Wang, 2016). Furthermore, it has been argued that social media can facilitate political expression, a crucial alley for people to get engaged in politics (Pingree, 2007). But how does social media facilitate political expression exactly? First, the interactive feature of social media enables people to share ideas with many people simultaneously. That is, the expressive potential of people has changed as they are able to

“post, at minimal cost, messages and images that can be viewed instantly by global audiences” (Lupia; Sin, 2003, p. 316).

Second, social media allows people to get in touch with a wide range of different people. Research has shown that people tend to express themselves more where networks are more heterogenous (Barnidge; Huber; Gil de Zúñiga; Liu, 2018).

By providing people with new spaces to express themselves, social media has the potential to foster democratic citizenship

Third, social media as a user-friendly platform cultivates political consciousness of users in their daily practice, therefore is believed to display political expression in a more accessible format and spirited condition, ultimately facilitating expression and participation (Gil-de-Zúñiga; Molyneux; Zheng, 2014).

There is an array of possibilities of how people can express themselves on social media –ranging from live-tweeting on content watched on TV (see “second screening” or “dual screening”; Chadwick; O’Loughlin; Vaccari, 2017; Gil-de-Zúñiga; García-Perdomo; McGregor, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga; Liu, 2017; McGregor; Mourão, 2017) to liking/following political actors (Tromble, 2018; Sørensen, 2016; Vaccari; Valeriani, 2015). Also, people’s motivations to express themselves on social media are manifold. While for some people it is a way to represent social identity (Correa; Jeong, 2011; Papacharissi, 2011), others want to take “corrective actions” (Rojas, 2010) of potential biases in the public sphere, or are driven by the wish to persuade others (Thorson, 2014; Kwak et al., 2018). Whichever the case, by providing people with new spaces to express themselves, social media has the potential to foster democratic citizenship (Yu; Oh, 2018). For example, having more opportunities for expressing themselves may help mobilize people to take real-world actions (Elin, 2003). Indeed, political expression on Facebook was found to facilitate the process of engaging in political pro-

tests (Chan, 2016). In the following, we elaborate on this and further ways in which social media promotes political participation.

3. Social media and political participation

Numerous studies have established a positive link between digital media use and political participation (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2015; 2018). Yet, how does social media promote political participation? As elaborated above, political expression is an important antecedent of political participation.

“Political expression is conceptually distinct from political participation in the way that political talk is distinct from political action” (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010).

Research shows that political talk precedes political action (Huckfeldt; Sprague, 1995). Similarly, political expression might work to enable political action by causing the expresser to alter his self-perception (Bem, 1967) from observer to participant. Pingree (2007) argues that expression may be the first step toward better citizenship by motivating

“exposure, attention and elaboration of media messages” (Pingree, 2007, p. 447).

Interestingly, positive effects of political expression already start in the preparation process of the expression: When individuals compose messages in their minds, information and pieces of knowledge become reorganized as they are transformed into language (Greene, 1984). Moreover, this process may lead people to reflect about their own views, thereby occasionally resulting in new ways of thinking (Bem, 1967). Once the message is released, the actual expression might foster the commitment to the views expressed (Tetlock; Skitka; Boettger, 1989; Yoo; Kim; Gil de Zúñiga, 2017) and create the feeling that the speaker’s voice has been heard (Pingree, 2007). In social media settings, there is always an audience for whom messages can be composed and to whom they may easily be released (Kim; Chadha; Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). Hence, social media may facilitate the process of political expression by providing a convenient platform including audience for it. And not only that, social media often is also the source of information needed to compose messages: Research shows a positive relationship between using social media to get news about politics and public affairs and political expression on social media (Gil de Zúñiga; Molyneux; Zheng, 2014). One common way of encountering information about public affairs and politics on social media platform is by getting incidentally exposed to news (see last section of the manuscript). This also entails the chance to get exposed to mobilizing information (Segesten; Bossetta, 2017). As social media tend to expand social networks (Kim et al., 2013a), this attribute might enhance the likelihood to come across information that motivates individuals to engage in politics. A plentitude of studies have shown that social media has the potential to foster several forms of political activities online (i.e., to create an online petition, make a campaign contribution, sign up to volunteer for a political campaign, etc.) as well as in real-life (i.e., attend a political rally, boycott a certain product or service because of the social or political values of the company, par-

participate in any demonstrations, protests, or marches, etc.) (see for example, **Park; Kaye**, 2018; **Gil de Zúñiga; Molyneux; Zheng**, 2014). Hence, the potential of social media to foster political engagement is not limited to the digital environment but clearly, also has impacts in offline settings (see also de **De-Aguilera; Casero-Ripollés**, 2018).

“ Social media has the potential to foster several forms of political activities online as well as in real-life ”

4. Social media and political learning

Besides the positive effects for democracy highlighted above, social media can also be a cause for concern when it comes to political learning. While initially, optimists were full of hope that digital media could lead to an enhanced informed citizenry, recent findings suggest the opposite. In “Is Facebook making us dumber?”. **Cacciatore** and colleagues (2018) have given an initial answer to this question by showing that using Facebook for consuming and sharing news is negatively related to political knowledge. However, there is also reasons for hope. **Bode’s** (2016) results from an experimental study have shown that individuals who get exposed to political information via social media have learned from it.

Indeed, when theorizing about the relationship between social media use and political learning, there are good reasons to expect positive outcomes: First, literature suggests that consuming news via traditional media (radio, TV, newspapers) fosters political learning (e.g., **Chaffee; Kanihan**, 1997; **Eveland; Schmitt**, 2015; **Lecheler; De-Vreese**, 2017). Thus, consuming news on social media sites could do so as well. As people are more likely to engage with content posted by people they feel alike (**Bonchi; Castillo; Ienco**, 2013; **Ma; Lee; Goh**, 2013) and closer to (**Ganley; Lempe**, 2009; **Wang; Mark**, 2013), people might benefit from consuming news shared by peers on social media. Second, the fact that people often get incidentally exposed to news might also be beneficial for learning processes, as this was found to increase the use of further online news sources (**Fletcher; Nielsen**, 2018).

However, social media may not become a positive conduit to political learning. In fact, it has been argued that, news choices and individual characteristics (i.e. prior education levels, political interest, etc.) could generate gaps in knowledge within the context of social media (**Prior**, 2007). For example, questions arise whether or not social media provide per se the type of news necessary for individuals to learn, and different types of social media platforms may also generate diverse effects (**Yoo; Gil-de-Zúñiga**, 2014). Research shows that relative to a number of other news topics, news about politics is shared at a much lower level on social media (**Bright**, 2016). Over time, this may create what Bright calls a ‘social news gap’ in which people who consume news on social media hold different perceptions of the news agenda than traditional news users, which may in turn lead social media news users to become disinterested and disengaged

with political news altogether (**Bright**, 2016). If so, social media could create the same preference- and individual-based knowledge disparities outlined by **Prior** (2007). Moreover, when people see news in social media but do not click on it, consume it, or process it, the simple exposure may not be enough for passive learning, as it is the case with television (**Shehata**, 2013). Although people can recall political information from social media (**Bode**, 2016), social media use generally may not be linked to greater political knowledge gain (**Dimitrova et al.**, 2014), or only enhances learning for highly educated individuals (**Yoo; Gil de Zúñiga**, 2014). Despite the affluence of news and information in social media, active learning might become a prerequisite for political learning to unfold on this platform. One theoretical account that helps to better understand this phenomenon is the so called “news-finds-me perception (NFMP)”.

“ Social media use, generally may not be linked to greater political knowledge gain, or only enhances learning for highly educated individuals ”

5. The news-finds-me perception theory

Today, citizens find themselves embedded in an “ambient news” environment (**Hargreaves; Thomas**, 2002). News and information in various formats have become pervasive and constantly available for us (**Hermida**, 2010). At the same time, the world appears to be more complex than ever before (**Chandler**, 2014; **Stewart; Cohen**, 2000). News about recent international crises, diplomatic relations as well as the opaque and dubious intervention of international forces in national politics (e.g., fake news; **Waisbord**, 2018) present citizens with a constant flow of seemingly unsolvable issues the world is facing. While for some citizens this fast-pace news cycle simply presents a challenge to keep up with, others tend to get tired of the news (e.g., news fatigue: **Nordensen**, 2008) or ignore them completely (**Trilling; Schönbach**, 2012). Yet, coupled with a change in media technologies, others might perceive the “ambient” news environment advantageous in order to stay abreast of news. Various online or hybrid media channels, social media platforms or conversations online have facilitated ways to stay informed about current issues and politics nowadays (**Fletcher; Nielsen**, 2018). Recent figures of increased news consumption via social media channels worldwide support this assumption (**Newman et al.**, 2017; 2018).

Furthermore, with the emergence of news broadcasting on social media channels and other online platforms, the notion of “incidental news exposure” has emerged. That is, individuals become exposed to news and information about politics and public affairs on social media channels and while browsing through the Net, although not actively seeking it (**Fletcher; Nielsen**, 2018; **Hermida**, 2010; **Kim et al.**, 2013b; **Mitchell et al.**, 2016). The benefits of incidental news exposure for political knowledge or knowledge about issues discussed in the news are, however, contested. While one

stream of research has found that being incidentally exposed to news on social media supports the learning of political facts (Bode, 2016; Shehata *et al.*, 2015), another stream has shown that incidental news exposure is not necessarily beneficial for knowledge gains (Müller; Schneiders; Schäfer, 2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). One important distinction one has to make when studying learning processes based on news consumption is whether citizens actually believe they are well informed while browsing through the net, or whether they still believe they have to actively seek the news despite being incidentally exposed to news. This difference might explain why some might learn from incidental news exposure, and others not. Researchers have identified this belief as the “news-finds-me” (NFM) perception (Gil de Zúñiga; Weeks; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017).

While for some citizens this fast-paced news cycle simply presents a challenge to keep up with, others tend to get tired of the news

The NFM perception is conceptualized based on three dimensions. First, it describes the perception that one is well-informed without purposely following the news and, second, that important information will “find one” anyways through general media use, interactions with peers and social connections, especially on social media, and thus (third) there is no need to actually seek news and information, as ‘news will find me’ anyway (Gil-de-Zúñiga; Weeks; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Crucially, the NFM perception does not equal news avoidance, as this would require an active cognitive effort to avert news (cf. rational-choice theory: Doyle, 1999). Similarly, it does not resemble a disinterest in keeping up with the news. Instead, the NFM perception simply implies the belief to stay informed about recent news through other channels than official news sources (e.g., being active on social media, participating in online conversations, or browsing through the Net). However, while the NFM perception does not exclude incidental news exposure, and thus potential learning benefits, recent studies that have investigated the consequences of the NFM perception give reasons for concern.

The NFM describes the perception that one is well-informed without purposely following the news and, that important information will “find one” anyway

To begin with, findings from a survey study among US citizens have shown that the NFM perception is associated with a strong reliance on social media for news consumption. Traditional news outlets such as print news or television news, on the other hand, are negatively related with the NFM perception (Gil de Zúñiga; Weeks; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). While it has been argued that news consumption via traditional news might be more beneficial for democratic processes (e.g., offline political participation) than news consumption

via social media, if not explicitly politically motivated (Holt *et al.*, 2013), the proliferation of the NFM perception among citizens around the world becomes distressing in light of a well-informed citizenry. In fact, another survey study with a representative sample in the US has shown that while there is no direct relationship between the NFM perception and voting behavior, there are robust and direct negative associations between the NFM perception and both political knowledge and political interest (Gil de Zúñiga; Diehl, *in press*). In addition, a negative mediating effect of the NFM perception through political interest and political knowledge on voting behavior could be identified. These findings give reasons to believe that the NFM perception presents a danger for thriving democratic societies in which citizens are politically interested, actively inform themselves about politics and public affairs, develop a basic understanding of politics and current issues, and take part in democratic processes (e.g., voting).

Citizens might have developed the false belief to be well-informed without actively following the news (cf. NFM perception)

To conclude, as new media technologies emerge, the way citizens stay informed or consume news also change (Bimber, 2003; Williams; Carpini, 2011). With the ubiquity of information flows, news outlets and media channels, citizens might have developed the false belief to be well-informed without actively following the news (cf. NFM perception). Not only does this lead to lower news consumption, especially of traditional news, it also increases the reliance on less trustworthy sources of information on social media. In fact, recent research suggests that in today’s rich-information environment, the role of interest in the news has become an even more decisive factor for citizens and their news seeking behavior (Hopmann *et al.*, 2016; Strömbäck; Djerf-Pierre; Shehata, 2013). In a similar vein, new media technologies have not been proven to be a guarantee to fuel political interest and political engagement (Bimber *et al.*, 2015). Instead, the “new” news environment and the reliance on one’s own social networks for news and information can be considered detrimental for democratic behavior (e.g., interest) and processes (e.g., voting). Furthermore, the strong reliance on personal networks for news consumption might be nucleus for fostering ‘filter bubbles’ (Pariser, 2011) and ‘information cocoons’ (Sunstein, 2018) that are characterized by homogenous political opinions and viewpoints. Instead of seeking out a diverse set of news sources and information, citizens become highly dependent on what is shown and presented to them within their social networks, which are furthermore colonized by fake news and in command of algorithms, controlled by a few, influential technological conglomerates.

All in all, this paper highlighted specific mechanisms by which social media facilitates more robust and participatory democracies. In parallel, the manuscript also theorized the ways in which social media will not serve as a positive con-

duit to political learning, particularly via the proliferation of the NFM perception. Future research, however, needs to further and systematically delve into these issues to continue to move forward a programmatic agenda on social media and democracy.

“The strong reliance on personal networks for news consumption might be nucleus for fostering ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘information cocoons’ that are characterized by homogenous political opinions and viewpoints”

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El profesional de la información según Google Scholar Citations

<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=zv5d900AAAAJ>

The screenshot shows the Google Scholar Citations page for the journal 'El profesional de la información'. The page includes a header with the journal title and a 'SIGUIENDO' button. Below the header, there is a table of articles with columns for 'TÍTULO', 'CITADO POR', and 'AÑO'. To the right, there is a 'Citado por' section with a table showing 'Total' and 'Desde 2013' citations for 'Citas', 'Índice h', and 'Índice i10'. Below this is a bar chart showing the number of citations from 2011 to 2018. At the bottom right, there is a 'Coautores' section listing several authors with their profiles and roles.

TÍTULO	CITADO POR	AÑO
Acceso abierto a las publicaciones científicas: definición, recursos, copyright e impacto R Melero El profesional de la información 15 (4), 255-66	206	2005
Conceptos de web 2.0 y biblioteca 2.0: origen, definiciones y retos para las bibliotecas actuales D Margaix-Amal El profesional de la información	191	2007
El factor de impacto de las revistas científicas: limitaciones e indicadores alternativos R Aleixandre-Benavent, JC Valderrama-Zurián, G González-Alca El profesional de la información	188	2007
Prensa en internet: nuevos modelos de negocio en el escenario de la convergencia A Casero Ripollés El profesional de la información 19 (6), 595-601	140	2010
Google Scholar como herramienta para la evaluación científica. D Torres-Salinas, R Ruiz-Pérez, E Delgado-López-Cózar El profesional de la información 18 (5), 501-510	132	2009
ANALÍTICA VISUAL EN E-LEARNING. DA Gómez-Aguilar, FJ García-Peñalvo, R Therón El profesional de la información 23 (3)	115	2014
Cibermedios y web 2.0: modelo de análisis y resultados de aplicación R Rodríguez Martínez, L Codina, R Pedraza Jiménez El profesional de la información 19 (1), 35-44	114	2010
Arquitectura de la información y usabilidad en la web R Baeza-Yates, C Rivera-Loaiza, J Velasco-Martín	110	2004

	Total	Desde 2013
Citas	15851	10086
Índice h	49	40
Índice i10	488	318

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