



# Online news creation, trust in the media, and political participation: Direct and moderating effects over time

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## Abstract

This article explores the role of trust in professional and alternative media as (a) antecedents of citizen news production, and (b) moderators of the effect of citizen news production on political participation. Using two-wave panel survey data collected in the United States between December 2013 and March 2014, results show that trust in citizen media predicts people's tendency to create news. In turn, citizen news production is a positive predictor of both offline and online participation. More importantly, trust in the media moderates the effect of citizen news production over online political participation. Overall, this article highlights the importance of trust in the media with respect to citizen news production and how it matters for democracy. Thus, this study casts a much-needed light on how media trust and citizen journalism intertwine in explaining a more engaged and participatory citizenry.

## Keywords

Citizen journalism, offline political participation, online political participation, trust in alternative media, trust in traditional media

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Trust is an individual's favorable expectation about the positive outcomes from interactions with another individual, group, or entity (Coleman, 1990; Tsfati, 2003). *Media trust* and the related construct of *media credibility* have been prominent research topics in the past decades (Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Kohring and Matthes, 2007; Meyer, 1988). Research has consistently found a positive and modest association between media trust and media use (Kiouisis, 2001; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003, 2005). In other words, those with higher levels of trust in mainstream media tend to expose themselves to mainstream media more often (see Tsfati and Cappella, 2005, for details). Media distrust, on the other hand, drives alternative media consumption, which promotes a more diverse 'media diet' among more skeptical media consumers (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003: 518).

While there is ample evidence to suggest that media trust relates to media consumption patterns (Kiouisis, 2001; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003, Wanta and Hu, 1994), less research investigates the relationship between media trust and news production, that is, whether media trust is related to online news creation. The news media environment has evolved to become more horizontal, bidirectional, and diffused among non-professional communicators (Goode, 2009; Nah et al., 2015). Ordinary citizens now have the ability to create original news content or to collaborate in the dissemination and interpretation of the content created by others (Goode, 2009; Holton et al., 2015). Some previous research has examined and profiled those who produce and distribute user-generated content or 'citizen news' (e.g. Correa, 2010; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Kalmus et al., 2009), but there are still some gaps in the theoretical and empirical machinery. Scholars have made calls for more research about media trust as an antecedent or intervening variable for media production (Moy et al., 2004).

This article aims to fill these gaps in the literature. Based on two-wave panel survey data collected in the United States, this study examines the direct relationship between media trust and citizen news production. The study goes on to analyze the effects of citizen news production on offline and online political participation at a later point in time. Finally, we examine whether media trust moderates the effects of news production on participation. This study not only extends the understanding of why and how people actively engage in the process of news creation but also sheds light on the mechanisms behind the relationship between media production and political action.

### *User-generated news content and citizen journalism*

With the advent of the Internet and the subsequent development of so-called Web 2.0, the traditional media-audience relationship has evolved toward a different model in which the boundaries between production and consumption of news are more blurred (Dylko and McCluskey, 2012; Kim, 2012). In this increasingly interactive context, new media users or, 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006), have become not only consumers but also producers of online content and information, resulting in what the literature has referred to as 'user-generated content creators' or, more specifically, 'citizen journalists' (see, for example, Carpenter, 2010; Johnson and St. John, 2015; Kaufhold et al., 2010; Nah et al., 2015). Many studies have considered online content creation in a broad manner, including behaviors such as posting poetry, fiction, music, or artistic photography (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008); or activities such as uploading

videos to YouTube, writing material on web sites, or contributing information on Wikipedia (Lenhart et al., 2004; Leung, 2009). Previous research has found that general content creators tend to be young adults (Jones and Fox, 2009; Lenhart et al., 2004) and/or belong to ethnic minorities (Correa and Jeong, 2011; Harp et al., 2010). Findings are mixed concerning gender (Correa, 2010; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008) and socioeconomic status (Chen, 2007; Lenhart et al., 2004). The more specific profile of those who create information-oriented and/or politically related content, however, is much less explored.

Recent research on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of news media use has gradually abandoned the direct effects (stimulus-response) paradigm in favor of more complex approaches that connect motivations, attitudes, different uses of news media, and further attitudinal and behavioral effects. These indirect-effect approaches are collectively known as *communication mediation models* (McLeod et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2005, 2007). Within this theoretical and empirical framework, we argue that citizen news creation as a modern form of communication – similar to political messaging or political discussion – may also mediate the effect of ‘demographic, dispositional, and social orientations’ on participation outcomes (Cho et al., 2009; McLeod et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2007). The role of these previous orientations of the audience<sup>1</sup> still remains to be fully understood, especially regarding the antecedents and outcomes of citizen news creation. One of the few studies that has explored this area of research examined the socio-demographic and psychological characteristics of ‘online political content creators’ – defined as those who ‘write or post on their own blog’, ‘post comments on others’ blogs’, and ‘create and post their own videos online’ about current events or public affairs (Bachmann et al., 2012). According to this study, income, age, emotional stability, and life satisfaction negatively predict political news content creation, while extraversion is positively related. However, this exploratory study (a) relies on cross-sectional data, making it problematic to establish the direction of the causative relationship, (b) is based on zero-order correlations between the variables of interest, so it does not control for potential confounds, and (c) is focused on the impact of demographic and psychological characteristics of political content creators, but does not include variables concerning political orientations, political knowledge, news media use, and so on. Considering the scarcity of literature on this subject, our research aims to better explore the antecedents of a very specific form of using the news: producing citizen news content. Thus, we pose our first research question:

*RQ1.* What demographic and sociopolitical antecedents in Wave 1 predict citizen news production in Wave 2?

### *Trust in the media and citizen news creation*

The expectations of social trust are rooted in commonly shared norms, either in the form of ‘deep values’ or more secular principles like ‘professional standards and codes of behavior’ (Fukuyama, 1995: 26). A certain amount of trust is required not only for ensuring social order and cohesion but also for almost every human interaction (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984; Tsfati and Cappella, 2003), including economic exchanges (Lorenz,

1999), physician–patient relationships (Lee and Lin, 2009), and marriage or partnerships (Harris et al., 2008).

Within the framework of the communication mediation models (see, for example, McLeod et al., 2001; McLeod et al., 1994; Shah et al., 2007), we argue that trust in the media can be considered as one of the above-mentioned ‘motivational characteristics’ of the audience that may impact the outcome of media uses – either news consumption or production. In this vein, previous research focusing on the consequences of credibility (or the lack thereof) of the media has frequently found a positive, although modest association between media trust and media uses (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003, 2005). Because cognitive resources are limited, people prefer to pay attention to the stimuli they trust and from which they expect to obtain greater benefits, while avoiding those they distrust (Gaziano, 1988; Kiousis, 2001). Not all the effects of media distrust, however, seem to be negative for democratic life. In fact, uncritical acceptance of media content could be more dangerous than media skepticism (Gaziano, 1988). Traditional media skepticism, for example, seems to increase alternative media consumption, which causes ‘skeptics [to] have more diversified information sources’, or a more varied ‘media diet’ (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003: 518). What is not known, however, is whether distrust in traditional media, besides fostering alternative media use, also boosts citizen news production. Accordingly, the study offers the following research questions:

*RQ2a.* What is the effect of trust in traditional news media in Wave 1 on citizen news production in Wave 2?

*RQ2b.* What is the effect of trust in citizen news media in Wave 1 on citizen news production in Wave 2?

### *Citizen journalism and participation*

The relationships between news exposure and political participation has been the subject of empirical research and academic debate since the seminal voting studies in opinion leadership and the two-step flow model (e.g. Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). More recently, Putnam (1995, 2000) blamed the new technological trends (initially television and later the internet) for ‘privatizing’ and ‘individualizing’ people’s use of their free time so that social capital, civic engagement, and political participation are substantially eroded. Subsequent research, building on the uses and gratifications perspective (Katz et al., 1974), has consistently found that it is not the media itself that causes one or the other effect on social capital and engagement but the different uses that people make of them (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Thus, watching network news and current affairs programs increases political activity – including voting, contributing to campaigns, contacting elected officials, and protesting (McLeod et al., 1999; Norris, 1996). Similarly, exposure to news through the internet and social media has been found to predict both traditional (offline) and online participation (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003).

The effect of political news *use* on civic and political participation is often indirect. Within the scope of the communication mediation models, previous studies have

theorized interpersonal and intrapersonal ‘reasoning processes’ as key mediators that channel media consumption effects on cognitive and behavioral outcomes, namely political knowledge and engagement. Included among these mediating processes are interactive political messaging, interpersonal discussion, cognitive elaboration, or reflective integration (Cho et al., 2009; Jung et al., 2011; Shah et al., 2005, 2007).

Similar to these reasoning processes, it is not difficult to imagine analogous paths to participation via citizen news creation. The journalistic-like practices in which citizen content creators engage require a certain degree of specific knowledge about the facts or events being reported on. In order to learn from the news and to be able to contextualize and interpret them, citizen news creators, as ‘prosumers’—producers and consumers of content, see Ritzer et al. (2012) – are probably more exposed to news, engage in information-processing activities, such as reflective integration and cognitive elaboration more often (e.g. Eveland, 2002; Kosicki and McLeod, 1990; Perse, 1990), and are more knowledgeable about politics as a result. Taken together, these factors may, on one hand, trigger self-initiated participatory behaviors, that is, individual decisions to participate that are ‘not prompted by a request from an organization or signals that others were acting’ (Bimber, 2016: 8). On the other hand, citizen news platforms seem to be adequate spaces for political deliberation, where people – especially those who create the content used for further debates about a specific matter – can reflect on and discuss issues affecting them and their communities. Virtual spaces for deliberation, also often referred to as ‘online third spaces’ – beyond home or work – have been found to be ‘incubators of political actions’ both offline and online (see Graham et al., 2015a, 2015b; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2016). Based on these previous explanations and findings, it seems reasonable to expect citizen news creation to have a similar positive effect on participation.

This line of reasoning is consistent with previous research that has indicated the positive relationship between political content creation and participation (Bachmann et al., 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009). In a more open measure of citizen journalism, ‘expressive participation’ – which includes behaviors, such as commenting on news online, posting comments on political blogs, and using social media to express one’s opinion about current affairs – also has a positive effect on political participation indirectly through mobilization efforts (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Based on these findings and theoretical explanations, the following hypotheses are given:

*H1a.* Citizen news production in Wave 1 will be positively related to online political participation in Wave 2.

*H1b.* Citizen news production in Wave 1 will be positively related to offline (traditional) political participation in Wave 2.

### *Media trust as a moderator of news creation effects on participation*

Besides the implications of media trust for media use patterns, previous research suggests that media trust interacts with news exposure in predicting participation (Kaufhold et al., 2010). If trust in the media is understood, *grosso modo*, as the perception of the media being *objective, impartial, accurate, or unbiased* (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986;

Kohring and Matthes, 2007), one might expect trusted sources of news to have – comparatively – greater mobilizing power. In other words, information perceived as inaccurate or biased seems unlikely to trigger any participative behavior.

In line with this reasoning, citizen news use has been found to be positively related to political participation online, but this effect is exacerbated for those with higher levels of trust in citizen journalism (Kaufhold et al., 2010). Those with higher levels of trust in citizen journalism ‘are motivated to seek it out, engage with it, and may feel more compelled to mobilize accordingly’ (Kaufhold et al., 2010: 524). Part of the explanation of this effect could also lie in the often hyper-local and persuasion-oriented nature of citizen news content (Conover et al., 2002; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1991). Whether this holds for *creating* citizen news, however, has not been fully addressed. The number of possible interactions – news content creation by trust in traditional/citizen media on online/offline participation – and the paucity of empirical research in this area make it difficult to predict the direction of the interactions (if any). Considering this gap in the literature, we pose the following research questions:

*RQ3a.* Does trust in traditional news media in Wave 1 moderate the effect of citizen news production in Wave 1 on political participation online in Wave 2?

*RQ3b.* Does trust in citizen news media in Wave 1 moderate the effect of citizen news production on political participation online in Wave 2?

*RQ4a.* Does trust in traditional news media in Wave 1 moderate the effect of citizen news production in Wave 1 on political participation offline in Wave 2?

*RQ4b.* Does trust in citizen news media in Wave 1 moderate the effect of citizen news production Wave 1 on political participation offline in Wave 2?

## Methods

### Sample

Data for this study came from a two-wave opt-in panel survey collected in the United States between 15 December 2013 and 5 March 2014. Longitudinal studies are the most suitable for assessing causality or ‘describing processes over time’ (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 104). According to our theoretical approach, our hypotheses and research questions assume a particular causal direction (i.e. that levels of trust in the media predict citizen news production in time, and that citizen news production interacts with trust in the media to shape the patterns of political participation over time). Compared to cross-sectional studies, two waves of panel data provide us with better information about time-order effects, as we can control for the effect of previous levels of the dependent variable.

For the first wave, 5000 individuals over the age of 18 were selected from over a large sample of 200,000 people provided by the media-polling group Nielsen, which was hired to administer the panel. To ensure an accurate representation of the US Census, participants were selected according to a stratified sampling procedure, with a quota based on gender, age, education, and income. This method has been commonly employed and validated in previous research (e.g. Bode et al., 2014; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009).

In the first wave, we obtained valid data from 1813 individuals, representing a 34.6 percent response rate (American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) response rate calculator, see AAPOR, 2011). Three months after the completion of the first wave, 1024 participants completed the survey in a second wave, resulting in a 57 percent response rate. Retention rates in Waves 1 and 2 are both acceptable for online panel surveys in order to maintain data and representation (see, for example, Watson and Wooden, 2006 or Bosnjak et al., 2016). Although our sample is ultimately one of convenience, it is also demographically diverse and comparable to the US Census in terms of *gender* (51.3% males), *age* ( $M=52.71$ ;  $SD=14.72$ ), and *race* (77.9% whites) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). There are, however, slight differences with the US Census regarding age, ethnic composition, and education level. Our sample is older, more educated, and contains a lower proportion of Hispanics.

### *Variables of interest*

This study distinguishes between online and offline political participation. Our measurement of these variables is articulated around four dimensions: voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, and collective activities (see Verba and Nie, 1972). Voting behavior was – obviously – only included in the offline measure of participation. In this regard, we consider that participating in politics – either on- or offline – consists in sending signals to government and/or engaging in the decision-making process (see, for example, Putnam, 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999; Tolbert et al., 2003).

*Offline political participation.* Building on previous approaches to the construct (e.g. Best and Krueger, 2005; Graham et al., 2015a), an index was created based on seven questions intended to capture the respondents' frequency of conventional, offline participation in political matters. Respondents were asked to rate, using a Likert-type scale (1 = never to 10 = all the time), how often in the past 12 months they had 'attended a political rally', 'participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches', 'donated money to a campaign or political cause', 'participated in groups that took any local action for social or political reform', and 'participated in public interest groups, political action groups, political clubs, political campaigns, or political party committees'. Two more items included measures of respondents' voting behavior, asking participants how often they 'voted in local or state-wide elections' and 'voted in federal or presidential elections' (7 items averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ;  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ;  $W^2$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ;  $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ).

*Online political participation.* We measured online political participation (see Best and Krueger, 2005; Graham et al., 2015a) by creating an index of online political participation by averaging seven items measured on a 10-point scale. Respondents were asked how often they had 'signed or shared an online petition', 'participated in online political polls', 'participated in an online question and answer session with a politician or public official', 'created an online petition', 'signed up online to volunteer to help with a political cause', 'written a letter to the editor of a newspaper', and 'used a mobile phone to donate money to a campaign or political cause via text message or app' ( $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ;  $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ;  $W^2$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ;  $M = 2.05$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ).

*Trust in citizen media.* Partially based on previous research on trust in mainstream media (e.g. Jones, 2004; Moy et al., 2004), this measure was created by averaging scores of two items rating respondents' level of trust in citizen media (1 = do not trust to 10 = trust completely): 'How much do you trust news from alternative news media (e.g. blogs, citizen journalism)', and 'How much do you trust news from social media sites' ( $W^1$  Spearman–Brown = .70;  $M = 3.56$ ;  $SD = 1.98$ ).

*Trust in traditional media.* We employed two questions asking participants how much they trusted news from 'mainstream news media' and 'news aggregators' ( $W^1$  Spearman–Brown = .48;  $M = 5.00$ ;  $SD = 1.96$ ).

*Citizen news production.* Four items asked respondents how often they 'take part in posting or sharing photos, videos, memes, or gifs created by [them] that relate to current events or politics', 'create and upload [thei]r own videos', 'upload [thei]r own photos (to services like Instagram, Pinterest, or Facebook)', and 'write posts on [thei]r own blog' (1 = never to 10 = all the time;  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ;  $M = 2.16$ ;  $SD = 1.68$ ;  $W^2$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ;  $M = 2.18$ ;  $SD = 1.70$ ).

### Control variables

We included an aggregate measure of 'news media use' as a control variable to rule out the possibility that the (potential) effects of citizen news creation on participation are actually caused by news exposure (11 items averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ;  $M = 4.32$ ;  $SD = 1.46$ ). Scholars have associated the frequency of political talk with both traditional and online forms of political participation (see, for example, Graham et al., 2015a, 2015b; Wyatt et al., 2000). Therefore, we controlled for the effects of 'discussion frequency', which referred to respondents' frequency of political talk with people with whom they maintain relationships with varying degrees of closeness (nine items averaged scale,  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ;  $M = 3.27$ ;  $SD = 1.74$ ). The number of people with which an individual discusses regularly has also been found to have an influence on participation patterns (Eveland and Hively, 2009; McLeod et al., 1999). Our measure of 'discussion network size' was created using an additive index of two open-ended questions ( $W^1$   $M = 0.33$ ;  $Mdn = 0.24$ ;  $SD = 0.37$ ; skewness = 1.32). Previous research has identified patterns of mutual influence between the internal dimension of political efficacy and participation (Gastil and Xenos, 2010; Moeller et al., 2014). 'Internal efficacy' has also shown to predict news content creation online (Holton et al., 2015). Accordingly, our models control for the effects of this variable to isolate potential confounding effects ( $W^1$  Spearman–Brown Coefficient = .87;  $M = 5.34$ ;  $SD = 2.56$ ). Another control was 'political interest', which has been shown to be a strong predictor of political participation (Kenski and Stroud, 2006; two items averaged scale,  $W^1$  Spearman–Brown coefficient = .96;  $M = 6.67$ ;  $SD = 2.70$ ). Previous research has identified the relationship between political knowledge and participation off and online (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2011). 'Political knowledge' estimates respondents' awareness of current events and policy issues and, more generally, of the functioning of the political system and its institutional rules (Carpini and Keeter, 1993; eight items scale;  $W^1$  Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ;

$M=4.58$ ;  $SD=2.17$ ). The strength of attachment to the major political parties, which affects the patterns of political participation (Kenski and Stroud, 2006), was also controlled for in all our models ( $W^1$ ,  $M=2.10$ ,  $SD=1.88$ ). Finally, we also included five demographic variables: gender, age, race, education, and income.

## Results

This study first aimed to identify the demographic and sociopolitical antecedents that predict citizen news production ( $RQ1$ ). To answer this research question, we employed an autoregressive-lagged ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model<sup>2</sup> containing five blocks of independent variables in  $W^1$  (demographics, sociopolitical antecedents, media use, an autoregressive block, and media trust) predicting citizen news production in  $W^2$ . The results in Table 1 show that sociopolitical antecedents and demographics are the most important blocks predicting citizen news creation. Among the demographics and sociopolitical antecedents ( $RQ1$ ), only age ( $\beta=-.061$ ;  $p<.01$ ) is a significant and negative predictor, while strength of partisanship appears to be only marginally significant ( $\beta=.036$ ;  $p<.10$ ). The older respondents are, the less motivated they seem to become creators of news and political content. Also in Table 1, and regarding the relationship between trust in the media and news creation, the results show that trust in citizen news media ( $W^1$ ) is positively associated with citizen news production ( $W^2$ ;  $\beta=.068$ ;  $p<.01$ ;  $RQ2b$ ). Meaning that the more respondents trust in citizen media, the more they will tend to create their own news in the future. Conversely, we did not find any statistically significant influence of trust in traditional media on news production ( $RQ2a$ ). *H1a* stated a positive relationship between citizen news production and online participation, while *H1b* addressed a possible spillover effect from news creation to offline participation. To test these hypotheses, we constructed a series of autoregressive-lagged OLS regression models predicting political participation both online and offline (see Table 2).

Consistent with our expectations (*H1a*), results show that citizen news creation ( $W^1$ ) is directly and strongly associated with online political participation ( $W^2$ ;  $\beta=.104$ ;  $p<.001$ ; see Table 2, first column), which means that the more citizens create content related to politics and current events, the more they will participate online in politics in the future. Of the rest of variables in the model, discussion frequency ( $\beta=.064$ ;  $p<.05$ ) is positively associated with online participation, while news media use is a negative predictor<sup>3</sup> ( $\beta=-.067$ ;  $p<.05$ ).

We also found empirical support for our second hypothesis (*H1b*): news content creation ( $W^1$ ) is positively and strongly associated with political participation offline ( $W^2$ ;  $\beta=.119$ ;  $p<.001$ ; see Table 2, third column). In other words, the more respondents create news, the more they will participate in politics in the future and also in the offline arena. These results are suggestive of a spillover effect from digital, online news creation to analog, offline participation in politics. Of the rest of the variables, only age ( $\beta=.099$ ;  $p<.001$ ) and strength of partisanship ( $\beta=.070$ ;  $p<.001$ ) behaved as antecedents of offline participation, as both of them are positively and strongly associated with the dependent variable.

To further explore the relationships between citizen news production and political participation, possible interaction effects were also examined. Thus, our final set of

**Table 1.** Autoregressive- and panel-lagged regression models of media trust predicting citizen news production.

|  | Citizen news production (W <sup>2</sup> ) |
|--|---|
| Block 1: demographics W <sup>1</sup>               |   |
| Age  | -.061**                                   |
| Gender (female)                                    | -.005                                     |
| Education  | .004                                      |
| Income   | -.031                                     |
| Race (white)                                       | -.023                                     |
| $\Delta R^2$                                       | 9.5%                                      |
| Block 2: sociopolitical antecedents W <sup>1</sup> |   |
| Strength of partisanship                           | .036#                                     |
| Political knowledge                                | -.023                                     |
| Political interest                                 | -.006                                     |
| Internal political efficacy                        | .009                                      |
| Discussion network size                            | .028                                      |
| Discussion frequency                               | .027                                      |
| $\Delta R^2$                                       | 12.9%                                     |
| Block 3: media use W <sup>1</sup>                  |   |
| News media use                                     | .019                                      |
| $\Delta R^2$                                       | 3.8%                                      |
| Block 4 (autoregressive) W <sup>1</sup>            |   |
| Citizen news production                            | .722***                                   |
| $\Delta R^2$                                       | 37.4%                                     |
| Block 5: media trust W <sup>1</sup>                |   |
| Trust in traditional media                         | -.038                                     |
| Trust in citizen media                             | .068**                                    |
| $\Delta R^2$                                       | 0.3%                                      |
| Total R <sup>2</sup>                               | 63.9%                                     |

Sample size = 1021. Final-entry standardized regression coefficients reported. To maximize statistical power, missing values on variables have been replaced with the mean. # $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed). W<sup>1</sup> = Wave 1, W<sup>2</sup> = Wave 2.

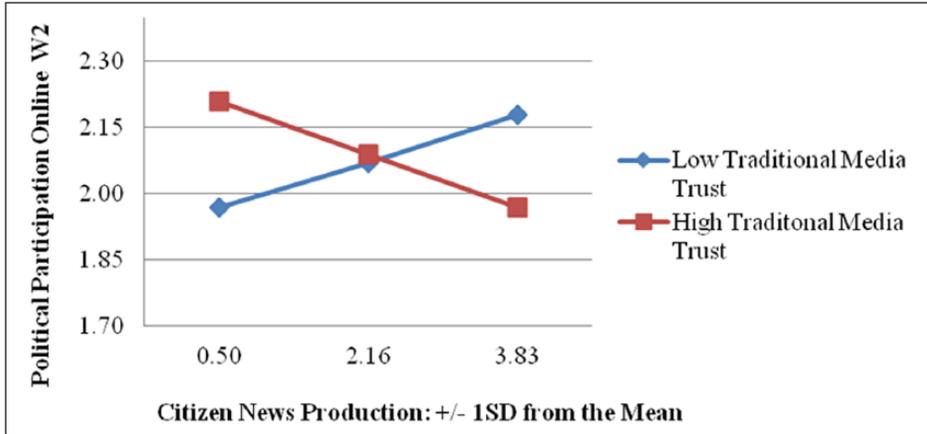
research questions addressed, on one hand, moderation effects of (a) trust in traditional news media (W<sup>1</sup>; *RQ3a*) and (b) trust in citizen news media (W<sup>1</sup>; *RQ3b*) on the relationship between news creation and online participation. On the other hand, the last two research questions addressed possible moderation effects of (c) trust in traditional news media (W<sup>1</sup>; *RQ4a*) and (d) trust in citizen news media (W<sup>1</sup>; *RQ4b*) on the association of news creation and offline participation. Again, we constructed a series of autoregressive-lagged regression models predicting online and offline political participation, but this time we included a specific block for the interaction effects (see Block 6 in Table 2). We found that trust in both traditional (*RQ3a*) ( $\beta = -.275$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and citizen news media (*RQ3b*;  $\beta = .213$ ;  $p < .05$ ) moderate the relationship between news creation and political participation online (see Table 2, second column). Specifically, among highly active

**Table 2.** Autoregressive- and panel-lagged regression models of citizen news production (CNP) predicting online and offline political participation.

|  | Online participation (W <sup>2</sup> ) |                   | Offline participation (W <sup>2</sup> ) |                   |
|--|--|-------------------|---|-------------------|
|  | Main effect                            | Moderation effect | Main effect                             | Moderation effect |
| <b>Block 1: demographics W<sup>1</sup></b>               |  |                   |   |                   |
| Age  | .041#                                  | .040#             | .099***                                 | .098***           |
| Gender (female)  | -.008                                  | -.006             | .004                                    | .005              |
| Education  | -.004                                  | -.003             | .016                                    | .016              |
| Income   | -.014                                  | -.010             | .019                                    | .020              |
| Race (white)   | -.032                                  | -.033             | .009                                    | .009              |
| $\Delta R^2$   | 1.5%                                   | 1.5%              | 7.9%                                    | 7.9%              |
| <b>Block 2: sociopolitical antecedents W<sup>1</sup></b> |  |                   |   |                   |
| Strength of partisanship                                 | .033                                   | .036*             | .070***                                 | .070***           |
| Political knowledge                                      | .028                                   | .028              | .046#                                   | .045#             |
| Political interest                                       | -.016                                  | -.011             | .032                                    | .034              |
| Internal political efficacy                              | .022                                   | .023              | -.011                                   | -.011             |
| Discussion network size                                  | .023                                   | .021              | .022                                    | .022              |
| Discussion frequency                                     | .064*                                  | .068*             | .012                                    | .012              |
| $\Delta R^2$   | 23.9%                                  | 23.9%             | 24.4%                                   | 24.4%             |
| <b>Block 3: autoregressive W<sup>1</sup></b>             |  |                   |   |                   |
| Political participation online                           | .648***                                | .642**            | –                                       | –                 |
| Political participation offline                          | –                                      | –                 | .651***                                 | .650***           |
| $\Delta R^2$   | 32.5%                                  | 32.5%             | 28.8%                                   | 28.8%             |
| <b>Block 4: Media antecedents W<sup>1</sup></b>          |  |                   |   |                   |
| News media use   | -.067*                                 | -.068**           | -.023                                   | -.025             |
| Trust in traditional media (TTM)                         | .001                                   | .087*             | .005                                    | .019              |
| Trust in citizen media (TCM)                             | .051#                                  | -.020             | .044#                                   | .015              |
| $\Delta R^2$   | 0.5%                                   | 0.5%              | 0.5%                                    | 0.5%              |
| <b>Block 5: news creation W<sup>1</sup></b>              |  |                   |   |                   |
| Citizen news production (CNP)                            | .104***                                | .173**            | .119****                                | .095              |
| $\Delta R^2$   | 0.5%                                   | 0.8%              | 0.8%                                    | 0.8%              |
| <b>Block 6: interaction effects W<sup>1</sup></b>        |  |                   |   |                   |
| CNP × TTM  | –                                      | -.275**           | –                                       | -.045             |
| CNP × TCM  | –                                      | .213*             | –                                       | .085              |
| $\Delta R^2$   | –                                      | 0.4%              | –                                       | 0.1%              |
| Total R <sup>2</sup>                                     | 58.9%                                  | 59.2%             | 62.4%                                   | 63.3%             |

Sample size = 1021. Final-entry standardized regression coefficients reported. To maximize statistical power, missing values on variables have been replaced with the mean. # $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed). W<sup>1</sup> = Wave 1, W<sup>2</sup> = Wave 2.

citizen journalists, those who show higher levels of trust in traditional media tend to participate less (see Figure 1; *RQ3a*). Within the same group of active news creators, those who show lower levels of trust in traditional media tend to participate more.

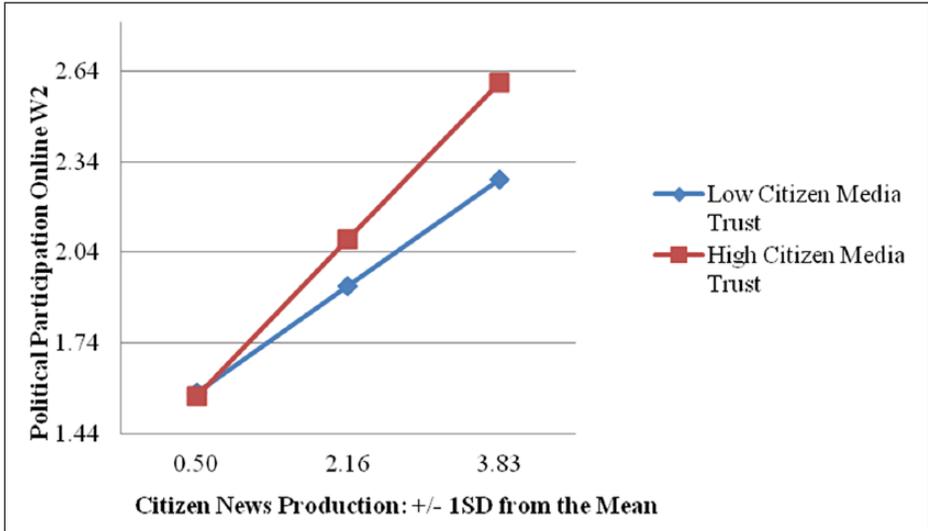


**Figure 1.** Interaction between citizen news production and traditional media trust on political participation (WWave 2). The  $R^2$  increase due to interaction is statistically significant:  $F(1, 1002) = 9.179, p = .003, N = 1021$ . The model controls for age, gender, education, income, race, strength of partisanship, political knowledge, political interest, internal efficacy, discussion network size, discussion frequency, traditional media trust, citizen media trust, and the interaction between citizen news production and citizen media trust. As the model is autoregressive, the effect of political participation online in Wave 1 has also been controlled.

Concerning the moderating role of trust in citizen news media, for less active citizen journalists, variations in citizen media trust do not appear to influence political participation online (see Figure 2; *RQ3b*). However, within the group of highly active news creators, higher levels of citizen media trust lead to an increased political participation online when compared to those that score low on citizen media trust. In other words, for those who generate more news content, trust in citizen media reports a significant extra benefit in relation to political participation online. Regarding *RQ4a* and *RQ4b*, no significant interaction effect on the relationship between citizen news production and offline political participation was found (see Table 2, fourth column). In other words, the level of trust in either traditional or citizen news media has no impact on the relationship between citizen news production and political participation offline.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article analyzes the production of news and news-related content, and the ways that production influences political participation. Moreover, this study separately considers trust in traditional media and trust in citizen media, while most previous works have focused solely on the former (e.g. Bennett et al., 1999; Kioussis, 2001; Jones, 2004; Tsftati and Cappella, 2003). Our study advances the literature on several fronts. First, we explain the role of media trust (more specifically, trust in citizen media) in stimulating citizens' interest in creating news. Second, we also show the positive impact that citizen news production has on political participation, both online and offline. Third, and perhaps



**Figure 2.** Interaction between citizen news production and citizen media trust on political participation (Wave 2). The  $R^2$  change due to interaction is statistically significant:  $F(1, 1002) = 5.773, p = .016, N = 1,021$ . The model controls for the same demographics and sociopolitical antecedents as those mentioned in Figure 1, and also the interaction between citizen news production and traditional media trust. As the model is autoregressive, the effect of political participation online in Wave 1 has also been controlled.

most importantly, we found that trust in the media moderates the association between content creation and online participation.

Overall, our findings advance our understanding of the chain of cause and effect that mediate the influence of different ‘uses’ of news media on political participation, while intersecting with considerations about so-called ‘self-reinforcement effects’ of news content creation. Although further research should test the mediating role of media trust and citizen news creation in an overarching model for building online and offline participation, this study suggests that our variables of interest may add a few more pieces to the puzzle of the communication mediation models (Cho et al., 2009; McLeod et al., 2001; Sotirovic and McLeod, 2001). In this light, citizen news creation is likely to be – together with discussion and reflection – another ‘reasoning device’ that channels the effects of news consumption on political participation (Cho et al., 2009). Similarly, media trust could potentially be either (or both) an antecedent (i.e. an ideological/situational orientation) or an outcome of news ‘uses’.

This study also contributes to the larger discussion on the ‘sender effects’, or the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of the creation of online content on the creators themselves (see Cho et al., 2016; Pingree, 2007; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Previous research shows that online news content creation and political expression bolster the senders’ partisan thoughts and reinforce their political preferences (Cho et al., 2016). These self-reinforcement processes have also been observed in the behavioral domain. Thus, people who engage in acts of online political expression are influenced by their

own actions in an effort to influence others, resulting in what Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) call the ‘mobilize the mobilizers’ effect—that is, an increased inclination to participate in politics themselves. Similarly, in our study, citizen news creation seems to mobilize the news creators, boosting political participation, both online and offline.

However, the study also shows that media trust moderates this relationship between citizen news creation and participation in certain ways. First, trust in traditional media diminishes the relationship between news creation and online political participation. Conversely, trust in citizen media tends to amplify the relationship: the effect of news creation on online participation is stronger among people with high trust in citizen news.

These findings relate to previous studies showing that skepticism towards traditional media fosters both online and offline political participation, while trust in mainstream media has detrimental effects on both forms of participation (Kaufhold et al., 2010; Moy et al., 2004). Trust in the mainstream media might discourage participation because people could perceive that journalists and the media are participating on their behalf (Moy et al., 2004: 542). Accordingly, active citizen news creators with high levels of trust in traditional news sources may feel motivated to share their political knowledge and to inform others but not necessarily to mobilize others to advance social or political change (see more about motivations for creating online content in Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2011)). Conversely, those who create news online regularly and show high levels of trust in citizen media may perceive themselves more like mobilizers or influencers (see Weeks et al., 2015). Thus, they may attempt to motivate others to action and they may end up participating themselves via the ‘mobilize the mobilizer’ effect (Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009).

## Limitations

There are a number of caveats and limitations to consider in the interpretation of these results. First, we used a convenience sample obtained from an online survey. Although the demographic characteristics of our samples are comparable to the US Census, participants were drawn from an opt-in panel and not from the general population. However, when survey research is intended to explain theoretical relationships between variables – as is the case here – rather than producing precise estimates of population values, opt-in online panels can be an appropriate choice (see Baker et al., 2013; Weeks et al., 2015). Our methodological approach is also far from being new in the field: the use of online panels consisting of volunteer participants has become increasingly frequent in communication research (see, for example, Beam, 2014; Burke and Kraut, 2016; Davis et al., 2013). Given the size and diversity of our samples, our quota-sampling method, and the number of control variables used in our models, we are quite confident about the external validity of our findings.

Finally, another qualification involves the period for the data collection. Although 2014 was a midterm election year, the data collection was completed on 5 March, well before the elections were held (4 November). Compared to non-campaign time, election periods are moments of high politicization of the citizenry, when the new media ‘expands the public sphere and fuels engagement’ (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2016: 2; see also Enli and Skogerbø, 2013). Further research should examine our findings in the context of a presidential election, where effects will probably be larger.

Despite these limitations, our study improves the understanding of the consequences of trust in the media, as well as the different ways in which news content created by regular citizens and media trust intertwine when it comes to explaining political participation. Overall, our findings invite a certain optimism about alternative paths to political involvement, both online and offline. A number of studies have noted the continued decline of trust in traditional media and its negative impact on media consumption and trust in the political system (Bennett et al., 1999; Smith and Son, 2013). However, this study hints at the promise of a silver lining: as trust in traditional media declines, trust in alternative sources of information may lead to renewed engagement in politics and public affairs.

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## Notes

1. In the words of McLeod et al. (1994), the ‘set of structural, cultural, cognitive, and motivational characteristics that affect the impact of messages’ (p. 146).
2. All statistical analyses were performed in SPSS, and the conditional (interaction) path models were retested using Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS macro.
3. We employed ‘news media use’ as a control variable to exclude potential confounds (i.e. that the observed effects on participation are actually caused by news media exposure instead of news content creation). That is the reason why we chose an aggregate measurement of the variable, which included such varied sources of news, such as local television, cable news, national newspapers, local newspapers, radio, online news sites, citizen journalism sites, Facebook, or Twitter. Since news media use is not related to *offline* participation ( $\beta = -.023$ , *n.s.*) and has a negative effect on *online* participation ( $\beta = -.067$ ,  $p < .05$ ; see Table 2), we also tested indirect paths to online participation using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). We found that news use ( $W^1$ ) is indirectly and positively related to online political participation ( $W^2$ ) via discussion frequency (point estimate  $\beta = .011$ ; 95% confidence interval: .013–.263). Thus, while the direct (overall) effect of news media use on online participation is negative (point estimate  $\beta = -.072$ ; 95% confidence interval:  $-.129$ –.016), the indirect effect via discussion frequency is positive. It should also be noted that our models are autoregressive (i.e. we controlled for prior individual levels of the dependent variables in Time 1), which reduces the amount of variance available to be explained.

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**Appendix I.** Demographic profile of study survey and other comparable surveys.

|                         | Study survey<br>(December<br>2013–Jan.<br>2014) | Study survey,<br>Second wave<br>(March 2014) | Pew Research<br>Center for the<br>People and the Press<br>Political Survey<br>(July 2013) | US Census<br>American<br>Community<br>Survey 2012<br>(1-year estimates) |
|-------------------------|---|--|---|---|
|                         | (%)   | (%)  | (%)   | (%)   |
| <b>Age</b>              |   |  |   |   |
| 18–24                   | 5.0   | 2.7  | 10.1  | 10.0  |
| 25–34                   | 13.5  | 11.1   | 11.3  | 13.4  |
| 35–44                   | 15.7  | 14.7   | 11.9  | 13.0  |
| 45–64                   | 43.0  | 47.5   | 38.8  | 26.4  |
| 65 or more              | 22.8  | 24.1   | 28.6  | 13.7  |
| <b>Gender</b>           |   |  |   |   |
| Male                    | 50.0  | 51.0   | 49.9  | 49.2  |
| Female                  | 50.0  | 49.0   | 50.1  | 50.8  |
| <b>Race/ethnicity</b>   |   |  |   |   |
| White                   | 76.2  | 79.1   | 72.2  | 73.9  |
| Hispanic                | 7.5   | 5.2  | 11.2  | 16.9  |
| African American        | 10.5  | 9.6  | 10.3  | 12.6  |
| Asian                   | 2.9   | 2.9  | 2.5   | 5.0   |
| <b>Education</b>        |   |  |   |   |
| High school or less     | 19.3  | 18.4   | 32.5  | 41.6  |
| Some college            | 34.5  | 33.9   | 27.6  | 29.2  |
| Bachelor's degree       | 30.5  | 31.9   | 22.6  | 18.2  |
| Graduate degree         | 8.8   | 11.4   | 14.9  | 10.9  |
| <b>Household income</b> |   |  |   |   |
| Less than \$49,999      | 46.0  | 44.3   | 45.9  | 51.9  |
| \$50,000–\$99,999       | 36.5  | 37.8   | 26.1  | 32.7  |
| \$100,000 or more       | 17.4  | 17.9   | 17.2  | 15.4  |