News Platform Preference as a predictor of political and civic participation

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Abstract

Scholars have observed the influence of online and offline media use on the promotion of political and civic engagement. Findings indicate a positive correlation between media use and participation. This study moves beyond such effect on participation. Using data from an original national US survey, this article explores the effects of News Platform Preference Scale – a construct that measures the contrast between online and traditional news use in a continuum – on participatory behaviours. Controlling for usual online and offline media use, results show that a preference for digital media has strong positive effects over political and civic participation, suggesting these media may indeed be different.

Keywords

Civic participation, offline news, online news, political participation, survey

In the digital era, the way people get their news has changed, at least in the United States. In 2010, for the first time, more people in the United States said they were getting their news online over print newspapers, with the Web coming second only to television (TV) among American adults as a destination for news – and the gap is closing (Smith, 2011). Survey data show that Americans are also spending more time following the news than they have for the past decade, supplementing their newspapers and TV news with news from the Internet (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2011), and a quarter of adults in the United States report getting their news from mobile devices (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). This has

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brought many changes in the news industry that has been undergoing major shifts in part due to new technologies and digital platforms, to an extent that the survival of print newspapers has become a question for academics and economists.

Of concern to this study is the preservation of an informed democracy – whether the Internet is an able means for effective political communication, especially in an age of extensive Internet access. Today's young adults are the most wired generation of all time (Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008), and the diffusion of smartphone technology, both devices and applications, continues unabated with more than 100 million users in the United States alone (ComScore, 2012).

Previous research in this area has begun to suggest that those who embrace digital versus traditional media are, indeed, still involved in public affairs – perhaps in different ways (Shah et al., 2002). There is evidence that online political engagement now translates to both online and offline participation, including an increased propensity to vote, especially among those with higher educational levels and incomes. And just, as there are traditional measures of political participation – voting, volunteering, campaigning, donating to a campaign, writing to an editor or a lawmaker and running for office – so, too, are there degrees of involvement online, including posting on blogs, messaging political content online, donating online, contacting candidates via e-mail and volunteering and sharing political beliefs through social networking (Shah et al., 2005; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012; Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). Following political news online has been found to increase both voting and online participation, including discussion and campaigning, which increase enthusiasm and voter turnout (Calenda and Meijer, 2009; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003). The Web also eases the process and eliminates the cost of reaching out to elected officials (Stanley and Weare, 2004), further enabling political participation. Some particular features of online media platforms also facilitate civic engagement, such as new forms of interaction, and opportunities for political expression and communication among large numbers of dispersed people (Smith et al., 2009).

While several scholars have highlighted the potential of the Internet as a tool for greater public participation (e.g. Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Marmura, 2008), this view has been labelled as utopian by researchers who argue that whether the Internet and technological development enhanced democracy, participatory citizenship and egalitarian communication remain to be seen (Charles, 2009; Van de Donk et al., 2004; see also Morozov, 2011). Critical perspectives also notice the obstacles preventing participation in this digital public sphere and the unequal access to these technologies (Hargittai, 2002; Howard et al., 2001; van Dijk, 2004, 2006) and focus on the negative aspects of the Internet, such as the reinforcement of the authority of governments and parties, surveillance methods and control over content. To this extent, Morozov (2009, 2011) has cautioned that for all the hype over digital tools for democracy, at the end of the day, what actually matters is offline participation, and thus, the author calls to further investigate the spill over effect of the Internet over offline political participation.

In an effort to acknowledge this more critical approach, we attempt to empirically elaborate on the mechanisms through which the Internet may in fact have a positive influence over political activities in both online and – perhaps more importantly – offline settings. We side with Internet optimists who see new technologies as a potentially democratizing force. Furthermore, this work is interested in the role of News Platform Preference Scale – a construct that measures whether one prefers to consume news online or offline in a single index – on citizens' participation and how that preference may influence political engagement and civic participation. Given the decline of traditional media in the sprawling shadow of online news, coupled with the logic that the information they provide may be different in some aspects (i.e. interactivity), this article contends that this may be an area of vital research in the coming years.

Furthermore, this work is interested in the role of News Platform Preference – a construct that measures whether one prefers to consume news online or offline in a single index – on citizens' participation and how that preference may influence political engagement and civic participation. Given the decline of traditional media in the sprawling shadow of online news, coupled with the logic that the information they provide may be different in some aspects (i.e. interactivity), this article contends that this may be an area of vital research in the coming years.

Literature review

Barack Obama's victory as America's first African–American president was not the only historical political milestone reached in 2008. A record-breaking 44% of American adults reported acquiring campaign information online at least occasionally during the presidential race – up from 18% of all adults in 2000 (Smith, 2009). By the 2010 midterm elections, the Internet was the second most commonly mentioned source of campaign news, trailing only TV (Smith, 2011). In 2012, the Internet continued to grow as a campaign news source.

The last election cycles also saw an eruption of online campaign information, which successfully exploited the unique architecture of the Web, especially searchability and hyperlinking (Kaid and Postelnicu, 2005). The Internet as a viable and prolific political news source is now well established. Other work has shown that political information translates ably to online forums. For example, Shah et al. (2001, 2005) found that online discourse contributes to political engagement and discussions in much the same way as did the corner store in an earlier time, if not replacing, at least moderating the influence of political messages in mainstream media.

Ironically, the seismic changes foisted upon the media landscape in the Internet age have their theoretical roots half a century ago within Marshall McLuhan's (1959, 1964) iconic concept that 'the medium is the message'. He discussed how new technologies introduced new languages, so that their predecessors were 'utterly changed by the intrusion of another language, as speech was changed by writing, and radio by television' (McLuhan, 1959, p. 340). This theoretical framework nicely describes the new voices engaged in political participation online. Furthermore, for two decades, scholars have discussed the uniqueness of digital media (Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996, Rafaeli, 1988; see also Kiousis, 2002), identifying interactivity as the core attribute that makes it so different from traditional media's one-way source/receiver model. Along these lines, Eveland (2003) describes six attributes that can more richly describe the predictive nature of some relationships – such as why age serves as a demarcation between traditional and online media preference. They are channel, content, textuality, organization, control and interactivity (p. 398). Interactivity is a central theoretical distinction to many of these relationships because Internet communication allows for instant, constant feedback loops, as well as it provides an arena in which information is not only consumed but 'prosumed'. That is, citizens now have a higher degree of interaction and participation on the news production process, consumption and dissemination.

Interactivity and participation

Online communication offers the unique ability to accommodate interactivity – allowing participants to simultaneously behave as receivers and sources in an endless wave of communication (Deuze, 2003). Interactivity refers to the extent to which communication reflects back on itself, feeds on and responds to the past, allowing participants to communicate and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (Kiousis, 2002; Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996). It allows customized

elaboration – directed information searches for the information desired in the moment – which has been shown to improve learning (Evans et al., 2004; Eveland and Dunwoody, 2002). It has so altered the online news landscape that the traditional source/receiver relationship is inadequate in the era of personalized news and user-generated content (Pryor, 2002; Shao, 2009). For Internet optimists, the Web has thrown open the gates to news accessibility and selection, reducing the need for the gatekeeping function of traditional journalists (Gennaro and Dutton, 2006) – at least potentially, but not necessarily (see, e.g. Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Williams et al., 2011). Communicating online is active, synchronous and engaging, and three dimensional, which makes it inherently more engaging (McMillan and Hwang, 2002), and hyperlinking to multiple sources can increase a reader's level of understanding an issue (Dalrymple and Scheufele, 2007; Eveland et al., 2004). The nature of the Web also amplifies behaviours previously shown to increase political engagement and participation like news use and discussion with friends (de Vreese, 2007) and exposes participants to discussion with a wider variety of people and ideas (McKenna and Bargh, 2000). Reciprocity – that is, sharing of information through recurring discussions – also increases online (Kobayashi et al., 2006), which may also have a positive impact in the democratic process.

The democratization of the tools of news production (Anderson, 2004) and the digital information landscape has challenged the traditional top–down model of mass media (Liu, 2003; Russell, 2009). More so, Wise et al. describe the act of seeking and viewing information online as being more engaging cognitively than traditional media use, saying that 'the underlying mental processes involved fundamentally shape the experience of receiving news online' (2008: 69). They found that readers considered a broader choice of stories and the interactivity of online news more physically stimulating than the narrower choices offered offline. While individual's need for news was highly predictive of political participation, whether they sought information online or offline also predicted just how they chose to participate politically (Kim, 2008).

Although communication research has long established that news and political engagement are closely related, news consumption is different in the modern digital age, with the Internet having multiplied both the amount and variety of content available. Unlike the past, the information associated with political participation is not expensive commodity (Bimber, 2000) and news users can make the most of increasing options for finding information about politics and public affairs (Tewksbury, 2003, 2006).

A preference for how one acquires news may reveal more about the message than the medium. It may also predict how people participate in both the civic and the political arenas, as tested by Bachmann and colleagues (2010) with young populations. Furthermore, the effects of the cycle of life in media preference and spurring engagement are also of importance. Individuals' inclination to consume one medium over another and engage in political activities can be affected by contextual situations in their life cycle. Generally, age is one of the most common indicators used to account for the effect of cycle of life on these issues (e.g. see Shah et al., 2005). However, there are other factors that may also influence this relationship such as marital status or having offspring. This study is somewhat limited as it did not control for the latter variables. However, age was included to control for possible effects of life cycle on media consumption preference and participation.

The ubiquity and interactivity of online information offer historic variety in both news sources and networking opportunities, as well as new opportunities to become engaged, whether politically or civically (e.g. Xenos and Moy, 2007). Such participatory consequences are clear especially when addressing the expressive potential of the Internet (Shah et al., 2005), which in turn promote discussion and participation (Bachmann et al., 2010; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009). In this context, the goals of this study are twofold. First, in order to establish a robust foundation for further testing

the effect of the platform preference on political participation behaviours, it intends to replicate whether news use online and offline relates to various forms of participation. So, we predict that:

> H1: Media use (online and offline) for news will be positively related to online political participation.
>
> H2: Media use (online and offline) for news will be positively related to offline political participation.
>
> H3: Media use (online and offline) for news will be positively related to civic engagement.

Once this premise is established, this research contends that a differential measure of online versus offline media will show a net gain from being exposed to online media over a more traditional version of the same information. This online news differential, or online news preference, is a complementary measure that may predict further political and civic participation beyond total media use.

More recent research has begun to explain how online behaviours contribute to political engagement, especially sharing and commenting on online news (Castells, 2007), and to civic engagement by expanding discussion networks and information acquisition (Shah et al., 2001). Now that research has shown a narrowing of the political knowledge gap between offline and online news users (Jung, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga, 2011), the time has come to seek other variables that further explain the distinction between these two platforms and political participation. More importantly, the ability to seek news and interact with its content has never been more easily accessible, and political information is among the largest tributaries feeding the river of information online (Bichard, 2006; Green and Coffey, 2006 Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril and Rojas, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga and Rojas, 2009). Thus, this article contends that the sheer contrasting preference of one type of news platform over the other may also shed light regarding the levels of engagement in the political participatory realm. People who yield a positive score in the news use platform preference index will gain more from the news than those who report lower scores. Thus, we propose:

> H4: The use preference for an online news media platform over offline will positively predict people's online political participation.
>
> H5: The use preference for an online news media platform over offline will positively predict people's offline political participation.

The degree to which ideas become ascendant in people's networks is the vastness of reach woven by the most active members – those who 'bridge' information between networks (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). These active networkers might also be expected to carry the newest or most diverse ideas between networks, which help community construction. Accordingly:

> H6: The preference for an online news media platform over offline will positively predict people' civic engagement.

Methods

Data

This article relies on an original survey data collected in the United States between 15 December 2008 and 5 January 2009 by a research unit at University of Texas at Austin. While previous

research has noted that online surveys may not constitute the preferred way to conduct survey research – achieving generalizability may be difficult as not all the citizens have Internet access and it is difficult to acquire a sample in which every subject carries an equal chance to be selected (Sheehan, 2001; Smith, 1997; Stanton, 1998; Thompson et al., 2003) – more recent efforts show viability within this kind of methodological framework when matching the drawn sample to key demographic variables of the US National census (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Vavreck, 2007). The current study employs this method.

Study participants were selected from a pre-existing pool of respondents.[1] In order to assure accurate US national population representation, this particular sample was based on two US census variables, gender: male: 50.2% and female: 49.8% and age: 18–34 years: 30%; 35–54 years: 39%; and 55+ years: 31%, and matched 10,000 randomly drawn subjects to these characteristics, following the example of previous research (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Vavreck, 2007). The first e-mail invitation was sent on 15 December 2008, which included the survey URL and details about a study-specific monetary incentive. A total of 1432 email addresses were invalid. Of the remaining 8568 participants, 1159 responded on all items and 323 had missing values for some of the variables of interest in the analysis. Accordingly, based on the American Association of Public Opinion Research's (AAPOR) RR3 calculation, the response rate was 22.8% (AAPOR, 2008: 34–35).[2] This falls within an acceptable rate for online panel surveys, which, to some degree, enjoy improved response rates due to incentives and lotteries that were employed by this study (Göritz et al., 2002). The survey data set addressed media use and political and social attitudes among adults, and for this particular study, the final subsample included 945 cases, corresponding to those participants who answered all the questions relevant for this study. Compared with the US Census data, our sample had more females and was slightly better educated. Nevertheless, the demographic breakdown of our sample was similar to that of surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center and other organizations that employ random digit dialing, which seems to lend support to how well our sample statistics estimate US population parameters (see Appendix 1 for full data sets comparison).

Measures

In order to test the relationship between political and civic participation and the respondents' News Platform Preference, a series of zero-order and partial correlations and regressions served to test the hypotheses. This article included a set of control variables that have also been found in the literature as central in the process of explaining the democratic process (for further details, see Gil de Zúñiga, 2006; Gil de Zúliga and Rojas, 2009; Bimber, 2001).

Control variables. The analysis used the following five standard demographic control variables and four additional control variables included in the regression models: political knowledge, political efficacy, extreme party identification and interpersonal discussions.

Demographics included respondents' age (measured with a six-group scale; median group: 40–49); level of education (measured with a five-point scale: less than high school, high school, some college, college degree, postgraduate degree; median group: college degree; $M = 3.59$, SD = 0.98); gender (33% male; 67% female); income (measured on a 10-point scale in which the median was $50,000–$59,999; $M = 5.54$, SD = 3.12); and race/ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian and Other).

Political knowledge was measured as a summation of correct answers asking to identify four political leaders: an additional question measured the latency of the responses ($\alpha = 0.46$, $M = 3.05$,

$SD = 0.98$), While the reliability is rather low, all these questions vary in difficulty and are not necessarily equally weighted measurements; thus, a summation can be problematic (Shanahan et al., 1997). With this in consideration, the analysis included the knowledge scale as a control variable despite the seemingly low reliability (Valentino et al., 2004).

Political efficacy was a summation of four items asking participants on a 10-point scale whether they felt they could understand and influence politic affairs ($\alpha = 0.65$, $M = 16.30$, $SD = 6.86$).

Extreme party identification measured those who identified themselves as extremely partisan in an 11-point scale that opposed Republicans and Democrats; the variable was ultimately dummy coded ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.47$).

Interpersonal discussion included three items that asked individuals on a 10-point scale how often they engaged in conversation about political issues with family and friends, with coworkers and acquaintances and with strangers ($\alpha = 0.71$, $M = 14.50$, $SD = 6.52$).

Independent variables. The hypotheses address the impact of people's preferred news platform for different media outlets. The survey included eight items that asked respondents on a seven-point scale how frequently they had consumed different online and offline news media, and another two items that used a 10-point scale to measure news aggregator use and reading blogs about public affairs. Two separate variables were computed: the summation of frequencies for *Offline Media Use* (including print newspapers, print magazines, offline radio news, offline network TV news, offline local TV news and offline cable TV news; $\alpha = 0.65$, $M = 25.23$, $SD = 7.27$) and the additive frequency for *Online Media Use* (online newspapers, online magazines, news aggregators and blogs; $\alpha = 0.72$, $M = 11.53$, $SD = 6.65$). Because these media variables did not have the same ranges of scores (given different number of items and different scales), the measures were standardized and then combined into a variable labelled *News Media Use*. Additionally, the variables were opposed and contrasted in a relative continuum scale, named *News Platform Preference*, where negative scores refer to respondents that opt for offline news media, and positive scores designate those who prefer to consume news online platforms (e.g. scored the minimum possible offline and the maximum possible online; see Figure 1; $M = -0.07$, $SD = 0.77$).

Dependent variables. As the hypotheses suggest, the primary concern of this study is with the impact of platform preference on people's civic and political participation, and the analysis used three dependent variables to explore this outcome:

Civic engagement is an additive scale that measures the respondents' involvement in community affairs and was computed from a series of questions asking participants the extent to which they had been involved during the last year in civic activities (worked as a volunteer for a non-political organization, raised money for charity, attended a meeting to discuss neighbourhood problems, bought a product because of the values of the company that produces it or avoided a product because of the values of the company that produces it; $\alpha = 0.81$; $M = 18.54$, $SD = 11.69$). The answers were measured on a 10-point scale ($1 = never$; $10 = all\ the\ time$).

Offline political participation was computed as an additive index of nine items measuring traditional political participation done offline during the last year (attended a public hearing, called or sent a letter to an elected official, spoke to a public official, posted a political sign or banner, attended a political rally, participated in any demonstration or protest, voted in the 2008 election, participated in local groups for political action or were involved in political action groups; $\alpha = 0.81$; $M = 2.63$, $SD = 2.29$). The answers were all dichotomous, $1 = yes$ or $0 = no$.
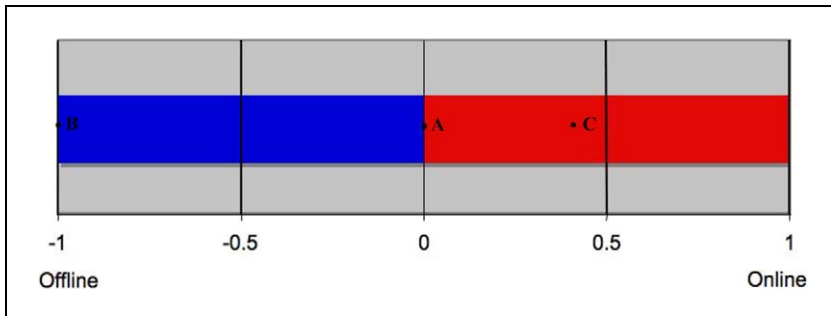
Figure 1. Explanation of News Platform Preference as a scale of contrasted media use. (A) 0 = *Neutral case*, (B) −1 = *hypothetical extreme offline case*, (C) 0.4 = *hypothetical slightly online case*. The News Platform Preference Scale contrasts the actual use of online (positive scores) and offline (negative scores) news platforms. It measures the overall preference by subtracting the offline scores from the online ones. In this scale, a zero designates someone whose preference is completely neutral: those who do not have a relative preference for one platform over the other and use both platforms at equal levels; −1 refers to respondents that opt for only offline news media all the time (i.e. scored the maximum possible offline and the minimum possible online); and +1 designates those who use exclusively online platform. Similar measurements have been introduced by scholars in other lines of research. For instance, see Prior's (2005) work, and the seminal work of Gunther (1991) or Rojas et al. (1996) to further understand similar contrasting measurements.

Online political participation measures the involvement in new alternatives for political action via digital means and was computed as an additive scale of seven items asking on a 10-point scale, the extent to which they had done several political activities over the Internet (e-mailed a politician, visited a political or advocacy website, made a campaign contribution online, subscribed to a political LISTSERV, signed up to volunteer for a campaign, sent a political message via e-mail, posted comments in a political blog; $\alpha = 0.89$; $M = 18.07$, SD = 13.57).

Results

As suggested by H1, H2 and H3, the measure of news media use was positively and significantly correlated with all three dependent variables (see Table 1), findings in line with past research. Thus, news consumption correlated with online political participation ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), offline political participation ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and civic engagement ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$).

Regarding platform preference, respondents were generally more inclined to prefer offline platforms ($M = -0.07$). Still, and as hypothesized, the preference for online news platforms was positively correlated with online political participation ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$) and with both offline realm measures: offline political participation ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$) and civic engagement ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$). The results held even after controlling for demographics, thus supporting H4, H5 and H6.

In order to further test the predictive power of News Platform Preference, we run a series of hierarchical regressions, and the results again supported the importance of the preference for online news platforms among respondents, even for conducting offline activities. The regression predicting online political participation had the control variables in the first block, several political variables in the second block – namely, political knowledge, political efficacy, extreme party identification and interpersonal discussions – and media use in the third block. The independent

Table 1. Pearson's correlations among variables.[a]

	News media use	News Platform Preference	Online political participation	Offline political participation	Civic engagement (offline)
News media use	–	0.21***	0.52***	0.35***	0.47***
News Platform Preference	0.19***	–	0.37***	0.19**	0.26***
Online political participation	0.52***	0.37***	–	0.59***	0.54***
Offline political participation	0.34***	0.21**	0.59***	–	0.58***
Civic engagement (Offline)	0.45***	0.24***	0.52***	0.55***	–

[a]Table top diagonal: zero-order Pearson correlations. Table bottom diagonal: partial-order Pearson correlations (controls included: age, education, gender, income, and ethnicity). $N = 945$, $df = 938$ (for partial correlations).
**$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

variable, News Platform Preference, was introduced in the fourth block. The first model explained 3% of the variance of online political participation, the political variables accounted for an additional 19% of variance, news media use (i.e. offline + online) explained an additional 12% and News Platform Preference explained another 7%, all of them at the $p < 0.001$ level (Table 2). Preference for news via online platforms contributed positively and significantly to online political participation ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). That is, the more the people preferred online news media over offline platforms, the more likely they were to engage in activities such as making a campaign contribution online, subscribing to a political LISTSERV or posting comments on a political blog. Other control variables like age ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.01$), education ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.05$), extreme party identification ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$) and interpersonal discussions ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$), positively and significantly contributed as well, but to a lesser extent. Only news media use ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$) was a stronger predictor of online political participation.

In other words, online news preference relates to participation in online political activities, even after taking into account for other variables that past research has consistently been shown as important contributors of political participation. While it can be argued that this effect has to do with people's preference for the online realm in general, the models testing the effect of platform preference in both offline political participation and civic engagement yielded similar results: online News Platform Preference is a positive predictor

Thus, the model about offline political participation also included the control variables in the first block, the political variables in the second block, media use in the third block and the independent variable in the fourth block. Not surprisingly, news media use positively predicted citizens' involvement in offline participatory activities ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$). Among the control variables, other significant contributors were age ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$), education ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.001$), income ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$), extreme party identification ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$) and interpersonal discussions ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$). More importantly, News Platform Preference accounted for a rather small but still statistically significant incremental variance (2%) beyond the effect of all other blocks. This means the preference for online news platforms did contribute positively to respondents' offline political behaviour, such as attending a political rally and voting ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Hierarchical regressions predicting participation and engagement.

	Online political participation	Offline political participation	Civic engagement (offline)
Demographics			
Age	0.08**	0.18***	0.03
Education	0.06*	0.19***	0.11***
Gender (female)	0.05#	0.05#	0.09**
Income	−0.02	0.10**	0.09**
Ethnicity (White)	0.03	0.02	0.05#
R^2 change	3%***	13%***	7%***
Political variables			
Political knowledge	−0.03	0.03	−0.06*
Political efficacy	0.05#	0.04	0.10***
Extreme party identification	0.14***	0.10***	0.01
Interpersonal discussions	0.20***	0.17***	0.27***
R^2 change	19%***	10%***	20%***
News media use			
News media use	.36***	.20***	.28***
R^2 change	12% ***	4%***	7%***
News Platform Preference			
NPP (contrasted use)	.28***	.14***	.17***
R^2 change	7%***	2%***	2%***
Total R^2	42%	29%	35%

[a]$N = 945$. Cell entries are standardized β coefficients.
#$p < 0.10$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$.

The regression about civic engagement further stresses the importance of News Platform Preference. In this case, the preference for online platforms also proved to make a positive and significant contribution ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < .001$), similar to that of education ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < .001$) and political efficacy ($\beta = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$). While interpersonal discussions ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$) and news media use ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) were the most important predictors, the block with News Platform Preference explained 2% of incremental variance (at the $p < 0.001$ level).

In sum, those who reported a predilection for consuming news online in contrast to offline showed higher levels of participation – online and offline. Indeed, News Platform Preference was a predictor of online political participation, offline political participation and civic engagement, supporting all six hypotheses. These results highlight the importance of online media as a platform of consuming news consumption. Its interactive capabilities, coupled with more dynamic mechanisms to discuss about, reflect on and share the news, seem to provide a fruitful setting for citizens to engage in political activities online and offline.

Discussion

This article aimed to expand the literature on media use and citizen involvement in civic life and on the democratic scene. Results indicate that, as has been suggested by past research and further supported in this study, news consumption online and offline relates to both civic and political participation. This relationship takes place regardless of whether we test online measures of

political participation or offline indicators of political and civic engagement. That news matter for the democratic process is not new. People seek information and constantly try to understand what is happening around them as it relates to the degree in which they will engage in further political and civic activities. This is a mature premise. However, this article borrows from this line of research and moves beyond the continuous measurement of news use to shed light on different activities within the participatory realm. Consequently, the strength of this study resides on the fairly new conceptualization of News Platform Preference. Unlike most studies where a more conventional measurement of news media use is in place, we build on this by operationalizing a differential measure between conventional and online media use to quantify selective exposure to one media platform over another. Thus, the relationship tested in this article is no longer about whether a person is up-to-date with things that occur in the public affair landscape and how it affects participation, but rather about how individuals prefer to get informed in a particular way. The consequences of that information acquisition, or preference pattern, are also relevant when it comes to understanding the outcome of public engagement in civic life and in the political arena, and it explains so above and beyond the effect of consuming news online and offline. People with a higher contrast of online platform preference will tend to participate more than their counterparts.

This way, there seems to be an effect of media on participatory outcomes beyond the effect of sheer media consumption. Those who consume more news online and offline will tend to participate more than those who pay less attention to public affairs. However, the contrast on news acquisition platform also matters. And this is the case regardless of whether it refers to online or offline means of participation and beyond the effect of demographic factors, social orientations and people's levels of news consumption. These results seem to indicate that the Internet may supply a set of characteristics that print journalism may be unable to provide. Other scholars previously considered and conceptualized online participation to be different from offline participation (e.g. Shah et al., 2007); however, little research has been empirically conducted on how online and print media differ when it comes to explaining, independently, the form in which citizens participate civically and politically.

A recent study contended that the preference for the digital platform, in contrast to traditional media, contributed to diminishing the gap among young adults and older individuals in the US in frequency of conventional news use. This article expands that line of research by testing the effect of this preference on civic engagement and political participation. Results indicate the more the one prefers the virtual platform as an information source, and the larger this gap with respect more traditional means of getting informed, the more likely one will be to contribute to the democratic process.

Previous research has deeply analyzed the strong correlation between consuming news about public affairs and the political socialization process, but has mostly ignored the impact of audiences' platform preference on behaviours associated with civic engagement. The growth of the Internet, both in terms of content and users, has resulted in a growing number of adults – not only the younger generations – embracing online technology to engage in public life and public affairs. Our findings suggest it is not that people are foregoing traditional ways to participate in the democratic process, but that Americans' preference for online media is actually contributing to their overall political participation (offline and online) as well as (offline) civic engagement.

Furthermore, social ties – the multiple individual networks to which people belong – also seem to play a central role in the need for elaboration. They may contribute to foster a two-step flow of news, as those most active and diverse in their networks are often the most informed and also the most influential in 'spreading the wealth' by transmitting their informed opinions. This may

happen both offline, in organizations, families and workplaces, and online, through blogs, social networking, e-mailing and the like. Despite 60 years having transpired since Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) landmark study on opinion leaders, their theoretical foundation is still strong. News Platform Preference may also contribute to both democratizing and expanding citizens' knowledge due to its practically zero cost to the audience. An online preference may yield new ways of transmitting the information to the general public as well as broadened channels of influence, perhaps blurring the relationship between elite information gatekeepers, opinion leaders and the public. Arguably, online media has a higher degree of interactivity than traditional media, which may help explain online engagement. Interactivity favours reciprocal message exchanges (Kiousis, 2002) and allows personalized news consumption with easy retransmission, morphing a receiver into a sender. Thus, citizens may obtain an informational and conversational net when preferring to consume information through a digital platform. This in turn, positively influences the means by which they engage in political activities. Hence, interactivity might impact the extent to which people participate in the democratic process.

This study poses a number of interesting findings as well as a number of challenges and limitations that need to be discussed. First, as creative as it may be, the measure of News Platform Preference is far from perfection. It determines certain characteristics of people's inclination with respect to how they use the media. However, further tests also suggest that although different from the conventional measurement of media use, they share some structural variance when introduced together in a predictive model of political participation. This may suggest that (1) the scale would need refinement and (2) mediating mechanisms may also be at stake. Further research should elaborate in this regard and try to sharpen and perfect this measure. Our findings are based on the responses from voluntary online participants, and while we attempted to accurately represent the US population as a whole, there were more female respondents than males, which should be acknowledged as a shortcoming – although the literature suggests that web-based and paper survey have higher response rates among women (Sax et al., 2003).

Along these lines, another limitation we encountered in this study dealt with the nature of the causality implied in our model. Although news use and participation are obviously related, it has been somewhat established that news use leads people to participate more so than participation would lead them toward future news consumption (Rojas, 2008). Nevertheless, we need to be cautious when interpreting the causality of this model with the proposed measurement of News Platform Preference since, although it is intrinsically based on use, it is distinct in its construction and its operationalization. A non-recursive model with panel data would greatly serve to dissipate these concerns. Of course, this is another suggestion for future research.

All in all, this article serves as a new, interesting and worthy avenue that contributes to the extant literature on media use and electronic or digital media transformation and participation in the democratic realm. It provides a new mechanism to measure today's (digital) democracy as News Platform Preferences predict the form in which citizens contribute civically and politically.

Appendix 1. Demographic profile of study survey and other comparable surveys

	Study survey December 2008–January 2009 (%)	Pew Internet and American Life Project Post-Election Survey November–December 2008 (%)	US Census Community Population Survey November 2008 (%)
Age (years)			
18–24	3.5	6.0	12.5
25–34	18.9	9.9	17.8
35–44	21.6	13.5	18.4
45–64	50.5	40.5	34.6
65 or more	5.5	30.2	16.6
Gender			
Male	33.0	47.2	48.3
Female	67.0	52.8	51.7
Race/ethnicity			
White	84.4	79.8	68.5
Hispanic	4.5	6.1	13.7
African American	5.0	9.2	11.8
Asian	3.0	1.3	4.6
Education			
High school or less	15.4	38.4	44.6
Some college	28.1	27.7	28.3
College degree	37.2	19.8	18.1
Graduate degree	19.2	14.1	9.0
Household income			
Less than $49,999	41.1	51.2	42.0
$50,000–$99,999	37.9	31.8	35.3
$100,000 or more	21.0	17.1	22.7

Notes

1. This voluntary, informed consent, privacy-protected online panel started in 2003 as a tool to conduct research for academic purposes. At the time of the study, it included more than 20,000 participants from the United States and abroad recruited for web-based research. The participant pool has been used in several research projects.
2. The formula for RR3 is (complete interviews)/(complete interviews + eligible nonresponse + e(unknown *eligibility*)), where e was estimated using the proportional allocation method, that is, (eligiblecases)/(eligiblecases + ineligiblecases).

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