

# Cognitive Benefits for Senders: Antecedents and Effects of Political Expression on Social Media

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## Abstract

Using panel data, this article examines the democratic benefit of expressing political messages on social media, by looking into the *sender effect* of information processing. Results suggest people who post textual and visual content tend to elaborate upon information themselves. The effect is different depending upon types of discussion motivations for discussion. Civic intentions such as persuasive discussion motivation led to elaboration about the information, while social discussion motivation did not. The relationship was mediated by news-seeking behaviors. Combining findings, this study proposes a theoretical model that implies a virtuous cycle of information flow on the social media sphere.

## Keywords

political expression, discussion motivation, elaboration, news use, social media

At the heart of a healthier and more engaged democracy is a rational and thoughtful public, capable of making informed decisions (Vraga, Edgerly, Wang, & Shah, 2011). Informed citizens seek information, reflect on the importance of the news or elaborate on it, and actively engage in society for the greater good of the community (Eveland, 2004).

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For decades, scholars have focused on the role of communicative variables such as political discussions in shaping an informed and participatory citizenry. They have argued that people can supplement the information they receive from media through interpersonal political discussions (Chaffee, 1972). Not only do political discussions work as a complementary agent to mass media information sources, but scholars also found them to be key antecedents of opinion quality, political understanding, efficacy, and even participation (Scheufele, 2000).

Regrettably, scholars interested in the effect political discussion may have on public opinion scarcely focus on the effects this political expression may have on senders themselves (Pingree, 2007). However, with the increased usage of social networking sites, online opinion expression and dissemination of information have grown significantly in recent years (Cooper, Green, Burningham, Evans, & Jackson, 2012; W. Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010). Furthermore, several researchers have begun to find that social media-based political expression is particularly powerful in encouraging the occurrences of informed and engaged citizens (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Valenzuela, 2013). Within this context, the time seems ripe to go beyond the reception paradigm of communication where audiences are passively receiving messages and further examine “the sender effect” of political expression on social media, that is, how individuals who disseminate a message are affected by their own communication efforts.

Therefore, this study attempts to see how political expression on social media influences individuals by probing its relationship with key variables such as discussion motivation, news seeking, and elaboration. Specifically, we hypothesize that various discussion motivations will lead to an individual’s expressive activities on social media, and that the relationship is mediated by news use. Ultimately, this act of expression is further expected to encourage one’s own cognitive elaboration efforts to make sense of what one gets from news use and discussions, a process called anticipated elaboration (Eveland, 2004; McLeod & Becker, 1974).

In this article, we will start by reviewing the literature that has established the relationship between discussion motivation, news media uses, and political expression. We recognize one of the gaps in the previous studies of “sender effect” is direction of causality (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Thorson, 2014), that is, the effect may simply reflect that cognitively and politically active people express their opinion more actively. Given this, this study uses a two-wave panel data to show better causal inferences over time. Finally, the article draws on the model that depicts cognitive benefit derived from seamless process of information-seeking and expressive activities within social media context.

## **Literature Review**

### *Motivation, News Use, and Talking Politics*

The past decades of research have shown the significance of political discussions in the democratic process, mostly benefiting citizens and society (Eveland, 2004; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002; McClurg, 2003). Primarily, these studies have taken a

receiver-effects paradigm. That is, the effects of communication are assumed to result from receiving messages, neglecting the possible effects on the message sender. Only recently have scholars started to pay attention to how the message sender is affected by his or her own act of expression (Pingree, 2007; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Thorson, 2014).

Although studies have shown that expression effects on senders are partially context dependent as well as content dependent (Han et al., 2011; Namkoong et al., 2010), it has been also argued that simple act of expression is likely to affect message senders' cognitions as well as behaviors (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Pingree, 2007). More interestingly, it is presumed that the expression effects on message senders occur at several stages of the expression process. That is, effects may occur even before the message is expressed (the expectation of impending expression), during message composition, or once the message is expressed (Eveland, 2004; Pingree, 2007). According to Pingree (2007), these three stages of expression effects could emerge either alone or in combination with either or both of the others. Although it may not be possible to discretely distinguish in which stage the effects take place, what is clear is that the process of self-expression alone can encourage cognitive and behavioral influence.

Today, such emphasis on message senders is even more important in the communication environment, particularly within social media, which allow different kinds of online expression to occur. In fact, a study has shown that people even consider their actions of clicking "like" as a mode of expressions (J. W. Kim, 2014). When nonverbal communication such as behavioral expression of wearing a campaign button is considered as a form of opinion expression (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), those who use multiple modes of expressions online should be considered "senders." In this sense, it seems necessary to examine the effects of multiple modes of online opinion expressions, which have not yet been investigated. The idea that discussion among citizens is the soul of democracy (e.g., de Tocqueville, 1863) may well be extended to social media networks from traditional form of interpersonal communication networks.

However, all political conversations may not be equally effective. That is, certain antecedents lead to different consequences of political discussion (Erisen & Erisen, 2012; Thorson, 2014). Traditionally, motivations have been understood as a contingent factor that indirectly affects media and communication message effects (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986). For example, Eveland (2004) suggested different motivations for interpersonal discussion affect the nature of cognitive processing of discussion content.

Notwithstanding its importance, scholars also agree that relatively little attention has been given to the factor of motivation in the study of political discussion than it deserves (see Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011; Lyons & Sokhey, 2014). As such, mixed findings and observations have been reported by scholars as to what types of discussion motivations would lead to democratic outcome. Characteristically, Schudson (1997) distinguished between "political talk" with specific civic motivations and "sociable conversation," and asserted only the former is meaningful to democracy. Similarly, Barber (1984) distinguished "strong talk," which involves purposive political discussion, from "thin talk," which consists of comments on political events of the day. In this line of

thought, scholars argue that discussion motivations need to be civic minded, involving exchange of information with the purpose of forming opinions or making deliberative decisions on public affairs (Moy & Gastil, 2006; Scheufele, 2000).

Moving into the operational level, civic motivation of political discussion has been conceptualized along different dimensions in previous studies. Some scholars focused on expressive side of discussion motivation, that is, to disseminate information, express opinion, and to eventually influence the opinion of others (Hoffman, Jones, & Young, 2013; Thorson, 2014). Others thought civic motivation included the purpose of receiving messages, approaching political talk as information source to make sense of political issues (Eveland et al., 2011; Scheufele, 2000). Given that the purpose of this study is to find out “sender effect” of political expression on social media, this study calls the expressive dimension of civic motivation as *persuasive motivation* and tests it separately. Thus, we posit the first hypothesis:

**H1a:** Persuasive discussion motivation is positively related to social media political expression.

Next, we term the receptive dimension of civic motivation as *informational motivation* and posit the hypothesis:

**H1b:** Informational discussion motivation is positively related to social media political expression.

In contrast, some studies suggest even informal social conversation can benefit democracy as a whole by increasing political tolerance (Mutz, 2006) and awareness of oppositional rationales (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Walsh (2004) observed that it is more often that political conversations are motivated by social needs to interact with others. Casual conversations are intertwined with deliberative talks, leading to problem solving thinking and political actions (Ekström & Östman, 2015; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000). For example, people can make personal connections to political and policy issues while having common chatters about a child’s failing grade or difficulty of finding a babysitter (Mansbridge, 1999; Min, 2016). Scholars found there are diverse cases to start a social conversation about politics, such as to pass time, to entertain others, or to generate interesting arguments (Eveland et al., 2011). More recently, Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues (2014) found people who use social media for social interaction are more likely to express their political opinion on social media. To further explore the effect of social discussion motivation, we posit the following hypothesis:

**H1c:** Social discussion motivation is positively related to social media political expression.

Although motivations could directly affect one’s political expression, scholars suggest that the relationship between discussion motivations and political expression is likely to be mediated through one’s news media uses (Eveland, 2004). A person may

have a high level of motivation to be engaged in a political discussion, but he/she may not feel prepared to express his or her opinions because of his or her lack of knowledge. Consequently, this anticipated communication (McLeod & Becker, 1974) would lead one to purposefully search news about public affairs and current issue to support one's own position (Pingree, 2007) and thereby equip oneself to communicate better with others about politics (McDonald, 1990).

Indeed, the linkage of information-seeking behavior such as news consumption and information-giving behavior such as political expression is key for political talk to have democratic outcomes. In the tradition of the two-step flow of communication, opinion leaders in interpersonal networks are the ones who consume news heavily (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Particularly for opinion expressions, Noelle-Neumann (1993) pointed out the "articulation function of mass media" in providing "people with words and phrases they can use to defend a point of view" (p. 173). As these studies suggest, the traditional media were the primary information source for people who wanted to have informed discussions. With the rise of the Internet, a rapidly growing number of people are obtaining information on political and public affairs news online. In this online context, people may access information on demand, receive news more rapidly, and be exposed to diverse viewpoints (Mutz, 2006; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Particularly with the advent of social media, people are exposed not only to traditional news sources but also to news and information from their social networks (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Valenzuela, 2013). Taken together, it is possible to expect that discussion motivations will also lead people to seek more information through social media. Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are generated:

**H2a:** Persuasive discussion motivation is positively related to social media use for news.

**H2b:** Informational discussion motivation is positively related to social media use for news.

**H2c:** Social discussion motivation is positively related to social media use for news.

### *Political Expression and Elaboration on Social Media*

These social media not only allow more opportunities for people to gain information but also empower people to communicate with others by expressing their opinions (W. Kim et al., 2010). Their friendly environment tends to foster political awareness on a daily basis and thereby encourages people's political expressions (Geoff, Nicola, Evans, Jackson, & Tim, 2012). Although social media supports the discussion environment, political expression on social media differs from interpersonal political talks as it does not require the simultaneous participation of communicators. It shares the strength of other online communication forms in that people can follow and participate in the thread of discussion much more easily than in a political talk. Surely, social media has brought a new level of opinion expression online to spread (J. W. Kim, 2014; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). At the same time, expression on social media distinguishes itself from other forms

of online expression such as chat rooms and discussion boards. Earlier studies that examined online commentaries were less confident about their democratic potential (e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1999). However, discussion on social media has evolved into a more reciprocal form of communication where the distinction between sender and receiver of message is unclear and the roles are easily reversed (Yoo & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014).

Despite the distinctive characteristics of opinion expression on social media, only a few studies have looked at the effects of social media opinion expression or its relationship with informational use of social media. Only recently have a few scholars examined the relationship between political expression on social media and its news use; these scholars found that a greater use of social media for news and information leads to more intensive opinion expressions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Valenzuela, 2013). Adding on the currently developing studies that attempt to examine the effects of political expressions in specific, the study proposes the following hypothesis.

**H3:** Social media use for news is positively related to political expression on social media.

The early work by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) has shown that political expressions often convert into behaviors, being a precursor to other forms of political behaviors. With the rise of the Internet, which allowed for a rapid growth of opinion expression, more scholars pay attention to expressions made online and their influence on political actions. As with offline expression, a greater use of online expression led to greater political and civic participation efforts (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). More recently, scholars have found that social media expression led to political and civic participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Valenzuela, 2013).

Although expression is highly correlated to participation, the path seems to be a large leap. That is, expression in and of itself does not lead to participation; people need commitment to their beliefs to be able to take action. Recently, studies are exploring people's elaboration process to address concerns about the lack of explanation of psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of expression (Berger, 2009; Pingree, 2007). According to these studies, people who expect impending expressions are likely to process more heavily and ponder their information and thereby gain a deeper understanding, a process called anticipated elaboration (Eveland, 2004). Scholars of uses and gratification approach of mass communication have identified a similar process called "anticipated communication" (McLeod & Becker, 1974), in which people seek information in anticipation of using it in later conversation. Through this cognitive process, people could enhance their own ability to argue their position (Mutz, Sniderman, & Brody, 1996) and to strengthen their commitment to the views expressed (Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989), possibly leading them to subsequent political and civic engagements. A notable aspect is that anticipated elaboration can occur without actually engaging in expressive activities (Eveland, 2004).

Particularly strong goal-oriented text-based social media expressions could produce an even stronger degree of elaboration and ultimately mobilize expressers to participate. Notably, Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) suggested that mobilizers who tried to mobilize

others became even more persuaded through their own expressive actions online and ended up participating more. However, evidence of cognitive process that led to increased participation was not presented. In this sense, the concept of anticipated elaboration of sender effect remains in the realm of hypothetical argument. Without evidence, it could be argued that the effect expressive communication has on the sender does not exist or is at best spurious. For example, anticipation of expression may not have led to increased participation, but both expression and participation may have resulted from increased cognitive elaboration. Considering this gap of literature, we put the following hypothesis to test:

**H4:** Social media political expression is positively related to elaboration.

## Method

### Sample

The present study used a two-wave U.S. national panel collected via an online survey software, Qualtrics, to examine hypotheses proposed in this study. Participants were those who were registered to participate in an online panel administered by the media-polling group AS Nielsen. Nielsen's stratified quota sampling used to recruit the respondents from more than 200,000 people was used to assure national representativeness. This quota sampling helped to establish the national representativeness of demographic distributions to closely match with those of U.S. Census (see Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014, for this strategy).

The first wave of the survey was collected between December 15, 2013, and January 5, 2014. A total of 2,060 participants responded to the survey from the initial sample of 5,000 individuals with 247 eliminated cases due to incomplete or invalid data, yielding the response rate of 34.6% (American Association of Public Opinion Research, 2011). This is commonly considered to be acceptable parameters for web-based surveys (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003; Struminskaya, 2015). The follow-up of second-wave survey was conducted between February 15 and March 5, 2014. For this second-wave survey, 1,024 responses were collected, yielding a retention rate of 57%, which stays within an acceptable parameters of data validity and representation integrity for online surveys (see Watson & Wooden, 2006, for a discussion on the retention rate of Web panels). The appendix shows the comparison of the panel data with U.S. Census data. This sample had slightly younger, more educated respondents and had fewer Hispanics. However, the overall sample was comparable with other surveys employing random collection methods (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2013) and to the national population as whole.

### Measures

The analyses in this study included groups of variables from each wave of panel data: discussion elaboration, social media political expression, news media and social media use, discussion motivation, political orientation, and demographics.

Cognitive elaboration of political information occurs as a person is exposed to news or to a dialogue. Two types of cognitive elaboration measures have been used in the literature. Some studies measured news elaboration and discussion elaboration separately in one model (e.g., Eveland & Thompson, 2006), others measured one of the two (e.g., Eveland, 2004). In social media settings, the news and discussion elaboration often happen simultaneously because news is frequently coupled with opinions and comments. In constructing the criterion variable *discussion elaboration*, therefore, this study used a composite measure combining news and discussion elaboration measures. For discussion elaboration, respondents were asked on a 10-point scale (a) whether they find themselves thinking about conversation about politics and public affairs after the discussion has ended and (b) whether they find themselves relating conversations about politics and public affairs after the discussion has ended. For news, they were asked (a) whether they find themselves thinking about what they encountered in the news and (b) whether they find themselves thinking about how the news they encountered relates to other things they know. The four items were averaged as a variable (Wave 1: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = 2.60$ ; Wave 2: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 2.66$ ).

The variable *political expression in social media* taps various ways people talk and express themselves about politics on social network sites on a 10-point scale: "posting personal experiences related to politics or campaigning," "posting or sharing thoughts about politics," "posting or sharing photos, videos, memes, or gifs created by others about politics," "posting or sharing photos, videos, memes, or gifs created by you about politics," and "forwarding someone else's political commentary to other people" (Wave 1: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ; Wave 2: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ).

The variable *social media use for news* taps how people use social media for news seeking. Respondents were asked on a 10-point scale to what extent social network sites helped them to stay informed "about current events and public affairs," "about [their] community," and "about current events from mainstream media" (Wave 1: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ; Wave 2: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ).

As for *news media use*, this study used a composite scale that taps various ways people obtain news from sources other than social media from Wave 1 data. Respondents were asked how often they used the following 11 media to get information about current events, public issues, or politics: network TV news, local TV news, fake news such as *The Daily Show*, national newspapers, local newspapers, online news sites, cable TV news, radio news, tablet application or browser, smartphone application or browser, and news aggregators (10-point scale, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ,  $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ).

Three variables measured different motivations for engaging in political discussion: *persuasive motivation*, *informational motivation*, and *social motivation for discussion* using Wave 1 data. On a 10-point scale, respondents were asked the frequency of eight kinds of motivations for talking about politics and public affairs online or offline. To identify the dimensions underlying these motivations, a factor analysis with



**Table 1.** Factor Analysis of Motivations for Political Discussion.

	I Persuasive	II Informational	III Social
To persuade others about something	<b>.840</b>	.419	.283
To express your ideas and opinions	<b>.638</b>	.596	.306
To stay informed about politics	.291	<b>.868</b>	.265
To listen to what others have to say	.224	<b>.815</b>	.409
To form your opinion about something	.392	<b>.799</b>	.273
To pass time with others	.139	.272	<b>.888</b>
To entertain yourself with others	.130	.199	<b>.881</b>
To get to know others better	.208	.418	<b>.771</b>
Eigenvalues	1.49	2.93	2.64
Total variance explained (%)	18.6	36.7	33.1

Note. Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. Primary loading of a variable on a factor is indicated by boldface type.

varimax rotation was employed. As shown in Table 1, three components with eigenvalue more than 1 were extracted and turned into additive scales.

The component *persuasive motivation* averaged two items: “to persuade others about something” and “to express your ideas and opinions” ( $r = .80, p < .001, M = 4.32, SD = 2.71$ ). The component *informational motivation* was constructed by averaging three kinds of discussion motivations: “to stay informed about politics and public affairs,” “to form your opinion about something,” and “to listen to what others have to say” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .94, M = 4.69, SD = 2.72$ ). Finally, the third variable *social motivation* averaged three items: “to pass time with others,” “to entertain yourself with others,” and “to get to know others better” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89, M = 3.48, SD = 2.32$ ).

Finally, using Wave 1 data, a number of political orientation variables were constructed and used as control variables. People’s confidence in their abilities to impact the political system may affect their motivation to express themselves politically. Thus, this study controlled for *internal political efficacy*. Drawing from the previous studies that relied on a single-item measure to avoid possible overlap with external political efficacy (e.g., Bennett, 1997), this study also used a single-item 10-point scale measure asking the question “people like me can influence the government” ( $M = 4.68, SD = 2.56$ ). Next, the variable *strength of party identification* was created and also used as a control. For this variable, respondents were asked to rate their party identification using an 11-point scale ranging from *strong Republican* (coded as 0, 6.4% of respondents) to *strong Democrat* (coded as 10, 9.9% of respondents). The midpoint (coded as 5) is regarded as *Independent* (34.3% of respondents). This item was folded into a 6-point scale ranging from *no partisanship* to *strong partisanship*, by recoding scores 0 and 10 to 6, 1 and 9 to 5, 2 and 8 to 4, 3 and 7 to 3, 4 and 6 to 2, and 5 to 1 ( $M = 3.07, SD = 1.42$ ). As for *political interest*, a single-item variable measured respondents’ interest in information about what’s going on in politics and public affairs (10-point scale,  $M = 6.37, SD = 2.72$ ). In addition, the single-item variable *general*

*social media use* asked the respondents how often they use social media on a typical day (1 = *never*, 10 = *all the time*;  $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 2.98$ ).

Demographic variables were included to control for potential confounds. The respondent's *gender* (50.2% women), *age* ( $M = 52.71$ ,  $SD = 14.77$ ), and *race* (77% Whites) were straightforward in their measurement. *Education* was operationalized as highest level of formal education completed ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $Mdn = 2$ -year college degree). For *income*, each respondent chose one of 15 categories of total annual household income ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $Mdn = US\$50,000$ - $US\$59,999$ ).

### Statistical Analysis

The hypotheses were tested by three sets of OLS regression models with lagged dependent variables, each predicting discussion elaboration, social media political expression, and social media use for news. Because the panel data were gathered at 2 months' interval, which may coincide with the actual time lag of cognitive effects, this study used a lagged effect model of causal analysis (Finkel, 1995). That is, criterion variables of Wave 2 ( $Y_T$ ) were regressed on Wave 1 variables ( $X_{T-1}$ ). Inclusion of the previous level of criterion variable ( $Y_{T-1}$ ) allows for the evaluation of the independent effect of the predictor variables over time (Finkel, 1995). This method is relevant to this study because by doing so, one can control the effect of elaboration on other variables. That is, we can see whether social media political expression and discussion motivation increase the level of cognitive elaboration, not vice versa.

Based on the regression results, we have employed structural equation modeling to test the theoretical structure of anticipatory elaboration and the two-step flow of political information. Finally, a set of partial correlations among all dependent and independent variables is presented. Analyses were conducted using SPSS 22.0 and AMOS 22.0.

### Results

The first set of hypotheses explored the role of discussion motivations as antecedents to elaboration effects of political expression on social media settings. This study separately examined the relationships of persuasive motivation (**H1a**), informational motivation (**H1b**), and social motivation (**H1c**) with the frequency of social media political expression. As Table 2 demonstrates, a significant and positive association was found between persuasive motivation and social media expression ( $\beta = .167$ ,  $p < .001$ ), even after controlling for previous expressive activities. However, the relationship with informational motivation was negative ( $\beta = -.124$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Social motivation was also related with social media expression positively ( $\beta = .115$ ,  $p < .01$ ). **H1a** and **H1c** are supported while **H1b** is rejected. This model explained 58.1% of the total variance of social media expression. Also, significant were news media use ( $\beta = .008$ ,  $p < .05$ ), social media use for news ( $\beta = .062$ ,  $p < .05$ ), political efficacy ( $\beta = .056$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and political interest ( $\beta = .052$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

The next set of hypotheses tested whether persuasive (**H2a**), informational (**H2b**), and social (**H2c**) motivations predicted news media use on social media platform. The

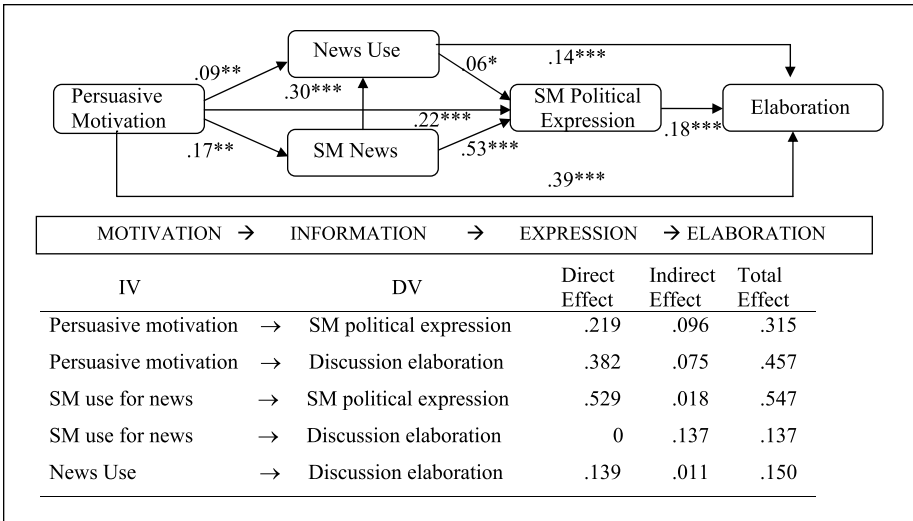
**Table 2.** OLS Regression Models Predicting SM Use for News, SM Political Expression, and Discussion Elaboration.

	SM news use <sup>T2</sup>	SM expression <sup>T2</sup>	Elaboration <sup>T2</sup>	
			Model 1	Model 2
<b>Block 1: Demographics</b>				
Age	-.016***	.003	-.051	.004
Gender (male)	-.105	-.033	-.059	-.118
Education	-.034	-.007	.102*	.060
Race (White)	.016	-.193	-.043	-.069
Income	-.079	-.079*	.003	.035
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	6.9%	4.3%	4.1%	4.1%
<b>Block 2: Political orientation</b>				
Political efficacy <sup>T1</sup>	.081**	.056**	.029	.031
Strength of partisanship <sup>T1</sup>	-.030	-.002	-.025	-.024
Political interest <sup>T1</sup>	.005	.052*	.191***	.102**
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	13.6%	9.9%	25.1%	25.1%
<b>Block 3: Motivation</b>				
Persuasive <sup>T1</sup>	.106*	.167***	.274***	.136**
Informational <sup>T1</sup>	-.063	-.124**	.133*	-.011
Social <sup>T1</sup>	.085	.115**	.065	-.023
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	4.2%	7.0%	16.1%	16.1%
<b>Block 4: SM and media use</b>				
News media use <sup>T1</sup>	.242***	.008*	.213***	.161**
SM news use <sup>T1</sup>	.617***	.062*	.117***	.010
SM political expression <sup>T1</sup>	—	.662***	.199***	.167***
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	30.6%	36.9%	3.6%	3.6%
<b>Block 5: Elaboration</b>				
Elaboration <sup>T1</sup>	—	—	—	.494***
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	—	—	—	8.5%
Total R <sup>2</sup>	54.6%	58.1%	48.9%	57.4%

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients. OLS = ordinary least squares; SM = social media. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

regression result shows that persuasive motivation had a positive relationship ( $\beta = .106, p < .05$ ) with social media use for news. Informational and social motivation did not have significant associations with social media use for news. **H2a** is supported while **H2b**, **H2c** are rejected. This model accounted for 54.6% of the total variance of the dependent variable.

**H3** asked whether social media use for news is related with political expression on social media. The results support the hypothesis ( $\beta = .062, p < .001$ ). Together with the first and second set of hypotheses, this constructs a two-step flow of political information on social media discussion networks; that is, news use is positively related to information giving (political expression) on social media.



**Figure 1.** Structural equation model of discussion elaboration by way of social media political expression and social media use for news.  
 Note. Goodness of fit:  $\chi^2 = 1.32$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = ns$ ; CFI/TLI = 1.0/.99, AIC/BCC = 39.32/39.54, RMSEA = .02 (.00/.09). Wave 1 (T1) variables = persuasive motivation, news use, SM news use, SM expression. Wave 2 (T2) variable = elaboration. Residualized variables = demographics (age, gender, race, income, education), political orientations (political efficacy, partisanship, political interest), others (informational motivation, social motivation, elaboration T1). Path entries are standardized SEM coefficients. All indirect paths are significant at 95% level of confidence. SM = social media; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; AIC/BCC = Akaike information criterion/Browne-Cudeck criterion; RMSEA = root mean square error approximation; SEM = structural equation modeling.  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**H4**, which tested whether social media political expression is related with discussion elaboration, is also supported by regression ( $\beta = .167$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, persuasive motivation ( $\beta = .136$ ,  $p < .01$ ) had a significant relationship with discussion elaboration. Informational and social motivation were not related to elaboration. This model accounted for 57.4% of the total variance of the dependent variable. Among controlling variables, political interest ( $\beta = .102$ ,  $p < .01$ ) had a significant relationship with elaboration. But demographic variables were not related. Among endogenous variables, news media use ( $\beta = .161$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was positively associated with elaboration. Social media use for news had no significant relationship with elaboration.

Based on the results of regression analyses, a structural equation model was constructed, as shown in Figure 1. For the sake of presentation, variables were residualized by controls. Because persuasive motivation was the only variable positively associated with the two key variables, social media expression and elaboration, the other two types of motivation (social and informational) were used as controls. Also, the previous level (Wave 1) of discussion elaboration was controlled for. The result shows an excellent goodness of fit for the proposed model, chi-square ( $df = 1$ ) = 1.32,

$p = ns$ ; comparative fit index (CFI)/Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 1.0/.99, Akaike information criterion/Browne-Cudeck criterion (AIC/BCC) = 39.32/39.54, root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) = .02 (.00/.09).

SEM shows that the relationship between persuasive motivation and social media political expression was mediated by both news use and social media use for information. The breakdown of indirect effect ( $\beta = .096$ ) and direct effect ( $\beta = .219$ ) demonstrates that a significant portion of relationship is channeled by news use behaviors. In the overall relationship between persuasive motivation and elaboration, the direct effect ( $\beta = .382$ ) was dominant as compared with the indirect effect ( $\beta = .075$ ).

In addition to the hypotheses testing, this study probed zero-order Pearson's correlations of the variables in the model to look at how key variables relate to each other. As shown in Table 3, the exogenous and endogenous variables are strongly and positively correlated with each other. Of interest is that age is negatively associated with both social media political expression ( $r = -.17, p < .05$ ) and social media use for news ( $r = -.25, p < .01$ ). Social media political expression was positively associated with political orientation variables such as political interest ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ), partisanship ( $r = .09, p < .01$ ), and efficacy ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ), while social media use for news was also associated with political interest ( $r = .12, p < .01$ ) and efficacy ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

Today, social media has become a public space where political ideas and information are traded seamlessly. Interactive political discussions are held across individuals' networks using expressive methods such as posting textual and visual content, forwarding or commenting others' messages, or simply expressing agreement.

The purpose of this study is to explore the democratic benefits of expressing political messages on social media. It is hypothesized that such activities would lead to two kinds of beneficial outcomes. First, relying on the theoretical concept of anticipatory elaboration in interpersonal discussion studies, this study tested how people who engage in political expression on social media will also tend to elaborate upon political information. In addition, this study predicted a positive association between news-seeking behaviors and increased political expression via social media. Combining the two, the theoretical model of this study demonstrates a process how citizens send out political message that is based on news consumption and elaboration.

As groundwork of the analysis, this study examined three kinds of political discussion motivation as antecedents of social media communication activities. The literature on expressive political conversation suggests that in interpersonal networks, much political talk is initiated to maintain social relationships, to fill in the conversation, or to provide enjoyment (Eveland et al., 2011). And motivations of political conversation affect its outcome by influencing the extent of cognitive processing of discussion contents (Eveland, 2004).

Our results suggest that political expression on social media is influenced by both persuasive and social motivation. However, although persuasive motivation contributed to cognitive elaboration about conversation and news, social motivation did not

**Table 3.** Zero-Order Correlations Among Independent and Dependent Variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Age	1															
2. Gender	.12**	1														
3. Education	-.01	.03	1													
4. Race	.14**	.11**	-.01	1												
5. Income	.01	.11**	.29**	.11**	1											
6. Political efficacy	.12**	.03	.08b	-.04	.01**	1										
7. Partisanship	.04	-.04	.04	-.04	.02	.13**	1									
8. Political interest	.29**	.20**	.11**	.08*	.18*	.34**	.13**	1								
9. General SM use	-.28**	-.13**	-.05	-.06*	-.04	.07*	.05	.01	1							
10. News use	.03	.05	.06*	.07*	.19**	.26**	.15**	.41**	.21*	1						
11. SM news use	-.25**	-.05	-.06	-.09*	-.03	.23**	.06	.12**	.65**	.36**	1					
12. SM expression	-.17*	.04	-.01	-.10**	-.04	.26**	.09**	.23**	.51**	.37**	.67**	1				
13. Persuasive motivation	.11*	.14**	.08**	.04	.13**	.27**	.05	.52**	.08*	.33**	.21**	.34**	1			
14. Informative	.14**	.10**	.11**	.03	.13**	.27**	.05	.52**	.08*	.37*	.19**	.28**	.85**	1		
15. Social	.03	.14**	.09**	.004	.10**	.22**	.07*	.39**	.13**	.37**	.24**	.36**	.73**	.74**	1	
16. Elaboration	.09**	.06*	.12**	.02	.12**	.30**	.07*	.56**	.16**	.44**	.31**	.43**	.62**	.60**	.53**	1

Note. Variables are from Wave 1 data (N = 1,024). Cell entries are two-tailed zero-order correlation coefficients. SM = social media.

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

result in elaboration. Scholars have stressed the importance of informal political discussion for democracy (J. Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; Mutz, 2006). Given the definition of informal political discussion as interaction that takes place outside of rule-bound formal structures of the political realm (Wyatt et al., 2000), political expression such as posting and commenting on social media may also be equated to informal talk. However, its association with persuasive motivation foretells a more tangible political outcome as compared with “small talks” in interpersonal networks.

As predicted, the regression showed that social media political expression is a significant and positive predictor of cognitive elaboration on the sender’s side. SEM analysis showed a stronger direct effect of persuasive motivation on elaboration than the indirect effect mediated by social media’s political expression alone. This may reveal the mechanism of expressive elaboration. A cognitive elaboration process can happen before or after the conversation, or even with simply the expectation of conversation (Eveland, 2004). This finding is an advancement that examined the expressive elaboration effect relying on cross-sectional data. By controlling for the previous level of discussion elaboration using two-wave panel data, this study was able to clarify the effect of anticipated elaboration and direction of causality, overcoming the limitation of previous sender effect studies.

This study also confirmed that the relationship between motivation and political expression is mediated by news-seeking behaviors on social media. The finding underscores the proposition by the two-step flow theory that those who influence others are the heavy users of news (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). To some extent, this study supports the findings of the communication mediation model on information communication technology, which reports close relationship between news use, discussion, and participatory behaviors (e.g., Shah et al., 2007). However, rather than assuming that news use results in political expression (discussion), this study posits that news use mediates, that is, is instrumental for, the relationship between motivation and expression. All in all, this study shares the perspective of the two-step theory and uses and gratification approach that media effects on social media is a product of motives and needs of active users. The SEM test showed as much direct effect as indirect effect between persuasive motivation and social media political expression, lending empirical support to this theoretical framework.

One gap in the literature of the communication mediation model of social media is the question of why people seek news on social media. In the new media environment, news consumption has become a goal-oriented behavior. Based on these findings, people may seek news to influence others. The other gap in the literature is the question of why political expression leads to democratic outcome such as increased participation. This study shows how the sender’s cognitive elaboration is facilitated in a way that may lead to such outcomes.

Indeed, we argue this cycle of motivation—information—expression—elaboration at the individual level may denote a robust path to political discussion and participation by politically active people. Given that political persuasion is an effort to sway the thoughts of people with different views (Thorson, 2014), social media political expression may be inductive to deliberative conversation. To date, few studies have analyzed

the democratic potential of social media political expression by probing a direct association with cognitive elaboration.

In spite of the new insights, this study has several limitations. The first relates to the measurements of the study. Relying on self-reports of survey data, our measurement of the crucial variables is vulnerable to bias. In particular, some measurement of political expression on social media such as “posting or sharing photos, videos, memes, or gifs created by others about politics” may not demonstrate the same level of cognitive efforts as compared with actual message production. Also, the measurement of discussion motivation is not completely exhaustive in covering the diverse motivations of social media use. This study extracted components from eight questionnaires that tapped persuasive, informational, and social motivations. Surely, there are other dimensions of motivations for engaging in expressive behaviors on social media such as exhibitionism and uncivil personal attacks. Next, the result should not be overstretched as to underestimate the contribution of social discussion motivation of political conversation. Its benefit should be studied from structural perspective, that is, strengthened ties among citizens and increased social capital of community. In addition, future studies should extend this research by examining the causal relationship of evolving methods of political expression with outcomes that go beyond cognitive elaboration, such as political participation, voting, and political knowledge.

Despite limitations, this study provides a rare finding on the expressive elaboration effects of communication on social media. The persuasive motivation involved in political expression and the outcome of elaboration implies that social media may become an arena for the proliferation of informal political conversation and participation. The findings to date suggest a hopeful prospect of the nature of messages exchanged in social media, some being political, and its consequences.

## Appendix

Demographic Profile of Study Survey and Other Comparable Surveys.

	DMRP Study Survey December 2013-January 2014	DMRP Study Survey second wave March 2014	Pew research center for the people & the press political survey July 2013	U.S. Census American Community Survey 2012 (1- year estimates)
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Age				
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

(continued)



**Appendix (continued)**

	DMRP Study Survey December 2013-January 2014	DMRP Study Survey second wave March 2014	Pew research center for the people & the press political survey July 2013	U.S. Census American Community Survey 2012 (1- year estimates)
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Gender				
Male	50.0	51.0	49.9	49.2
Female	50.0	49.0	50.1	50.8
Race/ethnicity				
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
Education				
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
Household income				
Less than US\$49,999	46.0	44.3	45.9	51.9
US\$50,000-US\$99,999	36.5	37.8	26.1	32.7
US\$100,000 or more	17.4	17.9	17.2	15.4

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