The contribution of social network sites to exposure to political difference: The relationships among SNSs, online political messaging, and exposure to cross-cutting perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of social network sites (SNSs) has raised questions about the role of social network media in the democratic process. This study explores how use of SNSs influences individuals’ exposure to political difference. The findings show a positive and significant relationship between SNSs and exposure to challenging viewpoints, supporting the idea that SNSs contribute to individuals’ exposure to cross-cutting political points of view. Partisanship was not found to interact with SNS use, suggesting that SNSs contribute to expanding exposure to dissimilar political views across individuals’ partisanship. Online political messaging also has a direct effect on exposure to dissimilar viewpoints, and it mediates the association between SNSs and exposure to cross-cutting political views.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed the coming to prominence of social media such as social network sites within the political realm as well as everyday life (Lenhart, 2009; Smith, 2009b). Social network sites (SNSs, e.g., Facebook and MySpace) have been used by campaign managers and ordinary citizens both as sources of information and as tools to broaden their campaign and viewpoints (e.g., Gueorguieva, 2008; Nielsen Reports, 2009).

The role of SNS in providing information about politics or public affairs and providing an online space for citizens to express opinions and participate in various activities has been increasing. In the 2008 US presidential elections, many people got information about candidates and the campaign from social network sites (The Pew Research Center for the People, 2008); nearly 1 in 10 of people under age 30 signed up with or “friended” one of the candidates on such a site. Users not only got news and campaign information from these SNS during the election, they were able to post their thoughts and comments. Thus citizens displayed a more active role in the political process (Smith, 2009a).

The increasing popularity of the SNSs as information sources and space for political activities and social interactions necessitates further research on the influence of such media on democratic processes. Studies have examined diverse influences of SNS use including impression management, network structure, privacy issues, and online/offline connections (see boyd and Ellison (2007) for a summary of research on SNSs). While researchers have begun to explore intersections of SNSs and politics, extant scholarship has focused primarily on citizens’ participatory activities such as political and civic engagement and social capital (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009).

One of the major academic debates over the role of the Internet is whether it contributes to or harms pluralistic democracy. Scholars have debated whether the Internet contributes to people’s exposure to diverse viewpoints, and whether it facilitates chances of exposure to varied, “cross-cutting” political views (Mutz, 2002a, 2002b; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009) or heterogeneous contacts (Bundridge, 2010; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004).

Exploring whether and how communication technologies affect individuals’ exposure to political difference is important because of its democratic implications. While exposure to similar points of view may have important political consequences such as enhancing attitude strength and mobilizing citizens in political activities (e.g., Schudson, 1995; Stroud, 2006), avoiding political difference and ignoring opinion-challenging information may hurt democracy. If individuals expose themselves only to similar points of view and avoid contrasting information and perspectives, they are less likely to be tolerant of challenging viewpoints (Mutz, 2002b), and society will be fragmented and polarized (Sunstein, 2007).

This debate can be extended to emerging social network media. As use of the SNSs grows and integrates with citizens’ political activities, the question becomes, what do people do on SNS for politics, and what would be the consequences of those activities? Whether and how SNS use influences people’s exposure to political viewpoints is one of those considerations. While SNSs may make it...
easier for citizens to either broaden their exposure to a variety of political viewpoints or seek information that supports their points of view, little is known about whether SNS use facilitates individuals’ exposure to political difference. Thus, the present research aims to examine the relationship between SNS use and individuals’ exposure to political difference.

1.1. New media technology, political fragmentation, and social network sites

The fragmentation thesis, which presents “the challenge to coherent societies and effective governments presented by the breakdown of broadly shared social and political experience” (Bennett, 1998, p. 741), has been prominent among debates over the role of the Internet in the contemporary democratic process. Its proponents are suspicious of users’ increased control over communication online. They see such power as possibly heightening selective exposure, in which people tend to expose themselves to like-minded perspectives, leading to the fragmentation of public opinion and the polarization of politics, to the detriment of democracy (Stroud, 2008; Sunstein, 2007). Others have argued that the Internet is a place where people can more freely interact with diverse others and participate in the political process. The former scenario results in exposure limited to similar viewpoints, while the latter results in more diversified exposure, which leads to hearing and talking to others.

Sunstein (2007) proposes mechanisms by which the Internet contributes to fragmentation of communities in the public sphere. He expresses concern that unrestricted, free media and channel choice undermines the preconditions of deliberative democracy, which he believes to be that citizens should be exposed to political diversity and should have a range of common experiences (Sunstein, 2007). These democratic foundations may be eroded by the choices offered by the Internet, which greatly increases people’s ability to “filter” what they want to read, and whom they want to see, hear, and even meet. This allows for the bypassing of contrasting viewpoints, thus hindering the ability to develop a broader common basis on which to relate, resultant in the fragmentation and polarization of society.

Psychologically, people tend to seek out perspectives like their own and information that supports their points of view for cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957) and efficient information processing (Smith, Fabrigar, & Norris, 2008; Stroud, 2007). However, decreased exposure to political difference that may be driven by selective exposure – what Sunstein (2007) refers to as enclavism – may widen political polarization to extremes. This runs directly counter to the norms of deliberative democracy: plurality and diversity of public opinion. Studies provide evidence of selective exposure on the Internet. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found evidence of ideological selectivity in news media use. Republicans preferred to view Fox News and to avoid news from CNN and NPR, while Democrats exhibited the opposite pattern (2009). A study found that blog users tended to avoid information that challenged their points of view and to seek out information that supported their political beliefs; and individuals’ political website use was among the most important predictors of selective exposure to political blogs (Johnson, Bichard, & Zhang, 2009).

However, there are arguments against selective exposure on the Internet; and studies have found divergent results. Bimber (2004) is less pessimistic than Sunstein (2007) with his suggestion that the Internet holds the potential to create opportunities against selective exposure or fragmentation. According to Bimber (2004), the most relevant dimension for our understanding of political fragmentation is the reach of the political communication system – that is, the extent to which messages span political cleavages. While he warns that failing to span the most important political cleavages will foster fragmentation, he also presents possibilities for the Internet to create a broader reach for political communication systems. He argues that “the Internet does not represent a singular mode of communication, but a flexible and adaptable set of opportunities for communication that can be exploited by individuals and groups in many ways” (Bimber, 2004, p. 31). This suggests that the Internet may contribute to integration of the public sphere as well as political fragmentation.

A recent study provides further demonstration. According to Brundidge (2010), the psychological and structural mechanisms involved with online selectivity may be somewhat weak; online news use and online political discussion contribute to expanding the heterogeneity of political discussion networks. It is important to note that inadvertency of media may facilitate exposure to diverse discussion networks. Brundidge argues that “inadvertency is facilitated online through (1) less than perfect online selective exposure strategies (2) non-avoidance of encounters with political difference, (3) weakened social boundaries between far flung geographic locations, between one discursive space and the next (blurred and porous boundaries creating increased interspatiality), between political and apolitical spaces of communication, and between the private and the public spheres” (2010, p. 687). This inadvertency thesis indicates that, even with less purposive seeking out of political difference, people are still likely to be exposed to political difference, at least to some extent, especially through inadvertency (Brundidge, 2010). In sum, a potential mechanism that may facilitate exposure to political difference is that people can inadvertently be exposed to cross-cutting perspectives and challenging information on the Internet because of the blurring of boundaries that cyberspace provides.

Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) support this notion that cross-cutting political exchange is likely to take place where politics comes up incidentally and is not the main purpose of online discussion spaces. They found that apolitical space was more likely to contribute to cross-cutting political discussion, while political chat rooms and message boards made only limited contributions to cross-cutting discussion (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). These studies suggest that exposure to diverse and heterogeneous networks may happen somewhat accidentally in places where politics and non-politics exist together.

In a similar fashion, SNS users may be more likely to be exposed to cross-cutting perspectives because of characteristics of SNSs that contribute to inadvertency, such as heterogeneity of SNS populations, hyperlinks, and interactive communication applications. In the context of SNSs, users have ample opportunity to become exposed to a variety of beliefs and perspectives, including contrasting viewpoints. Because electronic media have increased the diversity of available ideas (Page, 1996), and difference is not that hard to find in cyberspace (Dahlberg, 2001), especially where characteristics of politics and non-politics exist together.

In a recent study, the use of social network sites will be positively related to exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints.

Hypothesis 1. Use of social network sites will be positively related to exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints.

1.2. Online political messaging

In addition to exploring the association between SNS use and exposure to political difference, this study investigates the role of online political messaging. Literature suggests that another possible means of inadvertent online exposure to political difference
is online political discussion. Brundidge (2010) found convincing evidence for positive effects of online discussion on exposure to political difference. She found that online political discussion is directly and positively associated with discussion network heterogeneity and, furthermore, that it mediates the influence of online news use on individuals’ exposure to political difference. Similar reasoning can be applied to online political messaging – posting or commenting one’s thoughts and opinions through interactive messaging technologies such as on electronic bulletin boards and online chats (Price & Cappella, 2002; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005) – because online political discussion and political messaging share some of the characteristics of inadvertency or weakened social boundaries. Thus, this study proposes:

**Hypothesis 2.** Online political messaging will be positively associated with exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints.

**Hypothesis 3.** Online political messaging will mediate the influence of SNS use on exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints.

### 1.3. Moderating effects of partisanship

It has been demonstrated that individual differences, including preexisting psychological difference, may interact with effects of communicatory behaviors (i.e., media use and interpersonal communication) on individuals’ behavioral consequences. This study focuses on the role of partisanship, one of the most significant concepts that may affect exposure to political difference. Partisanship mitigates media effects (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Young, 2004). Partisans are more likely to expose themselves to information that supports their points of views because they are psychologically motivated to process information that is similar to their personal beliefs (Donsbach, 1991; Johnson et al., 2009; Stroud, 2008). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that partisanship might moderate the effects of online political messaging and SNS use on exposure to political difference. Thus, this study proposes:

**Hypothesis 4.** The influence of online political messaging on exposure to political difference will be moderated by partisanship.

**Hypothesis 5.** The influence of SNS use on exposure to political difference will be moderated by partisanship.

### 2. Method

#### 2.1. Data

Data for this study were collected by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, which was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between November 20 and December 4, 2008. Using a random-digit sample of telephone numbers representing all continental United States telephone households, the survey was conducted through interviews of a sample of 2254 respondents ages 18 and older. The response rate was 23%.

#### 2.2. Measurements

##### 2.2.1. SNS use

The use of social network sites is the independent variables of this study. SNS use was measured by an additive index compiled from five items gathered by asking the respondents about their use of network sites such as Facebook and MySpace. They were asked whether they (1) had gotten any campaign or candidate information from these sites; (2) started or joined a political group or a group supporting a cause on a social networking site; (3) revealed on a social networking site which presidential candidate they voted for this year; (4) discovered from the sites which presidential candidate their friends voted for this year; and (5) signed up as a “friend” of any candidates on a social networking site. The items were each dummy-coded (yes = 1, no = 0) and added to create an index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$).

##### 2.2.2. Online political messaging

Online political messaging was measured with two items asking respondents whether they have posted comments, queries or information about the campaign or the elections (1) in an online discussion, a listserv, or other online group forum and (2) on a blog, their own or someone else’s. The items were each dummy-coded (yes = 1, no = 0) and converted into an additive scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .68$).

##### 2.2.3. Exposure to cross-cutting point of view

The dependent variable of this study is exposure to cross-cutting political points of view. In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate whether most of the sites they visit to get political or campaign information online challenge their own point of view, share their point of view, or do not have a particular point of view. The dependent variable was dummy-coded “1” if most sites challenged their point of view.

##### 2.2.4. Control variables

Demographic variables were included as control variables in the analyses: age, sex, education, ethnicity, and income. Respondents’ party identity – whether they identified themselves as partisan or independent – was also introduced as a control variable. Respondents’ use of traditional news and online news was measured. Respondents were asked whether they read a printed copy of the newspaper yesterday and watched television news yesterday. These two items were added to create an index of traditional news use. Online news use was measured by asking how often respondents went online to get news about the election, with 1 indicating never and 6 indicating more than once a day. Another control variable included in the analysis was partisan media use. The survey included items asking whether respondents had visited websites related to Obama and the Democratic Party or the Republican Party and GOP candidates. This partisan Internet use variable was dummy-coded “0” if the respondent reported that they had never visited either kind of website, and “1” if they had.

#### 2.3. Data analysis

In order to test the Hypotheses 1 and 2, logistic regression analyses were employed on the dichotomous dependent variable. In addition, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis with a continuous dependent variable – online political messaging – was employed to test a mediating effect of online political messaging between SNS use and exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints (Hypothesis 3). Two interaction terms (online messaging × partisanship and SNS use × partisanship) were created and used in the analysis to test the moderating effects of partisanship (Hypotheses 4 and 5). The respondents’ demographics, partisanship, news media use, and partisan Internet use were entered as control variables in all regression models to assess the influence of each variable on the dependent variable and to examine the effects of the independent variables controlling for a set of confounding variables.

### 3. Results

Fifty-three percent of the sample was female and 79.5% were White; the median age group was 35–44. Their median education
level was some college including vocational school and 2- or 4-year college degree; median income level was $40,000 to under $50,000. Sixty-four percent of the respondents identified themselves as partisan and 11% of the sample reported that they had visited party-oriented websites. More than a quarter (25.3%) of the respondents reported that most of the sites they visit to get political or campaign information challenge their point of view.

Before addressing the primary aims of the study and multivariate analysis, a partial correlation analysis was conducted. A matrix of partial correlations between exposure to cross-cutting views, SNS use, online political messaging, traditional news use, online news use, and partisanship is provided in Table 1. SNS use and online political messaging were significantly correlated with individuals’ exposure to cross-cutting political views. None of the news media use, however, was correlated with exposure to political difference. Online news use was significantly associated with individuals’ SNS use and online political messaging. There were positive differences exposure to political difference. There were positive and significant associations between respondents’ partisanship and media use variables (age, gender, education, ethnicity, and income), partisanship, and media use variables (B = .200, p < .05). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2, online political messaging will be positively associated with exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints, was also supported. As Table 3 shows, online political messaging was significant after controlling for demographic variables, partisanship, and media use variables (B = .440, p < .01). People exhibiting higher degrees of online political messaging had significantly more exposure to political difference.

In order to test a mediation hypothesis, which states that online political messaging will mediate the influence of SNS use on exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints, additional regression analyses were conducted (see Table 4). The following conditions have to be met for a variable to function as a mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986): (a) a significant effect of the independent variable (SNSs) on the presumed mediator (online political messaging) (B = .166, p < .001); (b) a significant effect of the mediator on the dependent variable (exposure to cross-cutting point of view, B = .440, p < .01); (c) adding the mediators reduces a previous significant relation between the independent and dependent variables (from B = .200, p = .016 to B = .144, p = .103). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported (see Fig. 1).

Turning to the moderating role of partisanship, two interaction terms were entered in the logistic regression. The results are presented in Table 4 (see the right column). Hypothesis 4 predicted that the influence of online political messaging on exposure to

### Table 1
Partial correlations between exposure to cross-cutting views, SNS use, online messaging, traditional news use, online news use, and partisanship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Cross-cutting exposure</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. SNS use</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.075</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Online messaging</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.371</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Traditional news</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Online news</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Partisanship</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Cell entries are partial correlation coefficients, controlling for age, gender, education, race, and income (N = 758); two-tailed.

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

### Table 2
Logistic regression analysis investigating whether SNS use influences exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>Exp (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>1.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male = 1)</td>
<td>.156</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>.754</td>
<td>1.169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.304***</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>7.589</td>
<td>.738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (White = 1)</td>
<td>-.127</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>.313</td>
<td>.881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>1.601</td>
<td>1.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>-.082</td>
<td>.192</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>.921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional news</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.307</td>
<td>1.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Internet use</td>
<td>-.385</td>
<td>.228</td>
<td>2.867</td>
<td>.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNS use</td>
<td>.200**</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>5.822</td>
<td>1.221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square 16.87

### Table 3
Logistic regression analysis investigating whether online political messaging influences exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Wald</th>
<th>Exp (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male = 1)</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>.180</td>
<td>.620</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.303***</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>7.486</td>
<td>7.486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (White = 1)</td>
<td>-.109</td>
<td>.229</td>
<td>.225</td>
<td>.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.049</td>
<td>1.361</td>
<td>1.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>-.043</td>
<td>.192</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional news</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.201</td>
<td>.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online news</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>1.110</td>
<td>1.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Internet use</td>
<td>-.427</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>3.451</td>
<td>3.451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online political messaging</td>
<td>.440***</td>
<td>.159</td>
<td>7.674</td>
<td>7.674</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square 19.05

* p < .10.
** p < .05.
*** p < .01.
political difference will be moderated by partisanship. Partisanship turned out to significantly moderate the relationship between online political messaging and exposure to political difference ($B = −.180, p < .05$); thus Hypothesis 4 was supported. The interaction between online political messaging and partisanship on exposure to cross-cutting points of view is plotted in Fig. 2. The effects of online messaging on exposure to political difference were stronger for nonpartisans than for partisans.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that the influence of SNS use on exposure to political difference would be moderated by partisanship. Hypothesis 5 was not supported. These results suggest that the effects of SNS use on exposure to political difference were stable across partisan status.

### 4. Discussion

This paper aims to understand how social network sites influence individuals’ exposure to political difference. First, this study examined the association between SNS use and exposure to cross-cutting political viewpoints. It found a positive and significant relationship between SNS use and exposure to cross-cutting point of view. In addition, SNS use indirectly influences exposure to cross-cutting points of view through online political messaging.

Another aim of this study is to explore the role of online political messaging in facilitating cross-cutting exposure. Findings demonstrate that citizens’ online political messaging not only directly affects exposure to political difference, but it mediates the relationship between SNS use and exposure to cross-cutting perspectives.

Demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, and income) were not predictors of exposure to cross-cutting perspectives while education turned out to be a significant variable affecting exposure to political difference. More educated people are less exposed to cross-cutting points of view than less educated people, which is consistent with previous research showing that exposure to disagreement in political discussion was lowest among those who have attended graduate school (e.g., Mutz, 2006). Interestingly, partisanship did not significantly influence individuals’ exposure to dissenting political views while it moderated the association between online political messaging and exposure to cross-cutting perspectives. Regression analyses consistently showed the negative effects of partisan Internet use on individuals’ exposure to political difference. Those who visited partisan websites were less likely to encounter cross-cutting views than those who did not use partisan-based Internet. Previous studies demonstrate that individuals’ partisan media use (e.g., reading newspapers endorsing a candidate and visiting a candidate website) leads to polarization of political attitudes (Stroud, 2008, 2010). Theoretically, therefore, partisan media use should be related to exposure to cross-cutting perspectives. Those who use partisan media more frequently may be more likely to be exposed to like-minded perspectives because it is much easier to find similar views through partisan media.

Overall, findings imply that social network sites contribute to expanding individuals’ exposure to political difference in general, which is consistent with optimistic views on the role of the Internet in enhancing democracy by, for instance, increasing the heterogeneity of political discussion network (Brundidge, 2010).

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic variable</th>
<th>Beta (S.E.)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−.066 (.019)</td>
<td>.934 (.987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male = 1)</td>
<td>.012 (.030)</td>
<td>1.012 (.181)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>−.033 (.040)</td>
<td>.967 (.115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>−.004 (.008)</td>
<td>.996 (.062)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisanship</td>
<td>−.066 (.032)</td>
<td>.934 (.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>.023 (.021)</td>
<td>1.023 (.057)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNS use</td>
<td>.042 (.010)</td>
<td>1.042 (.025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Internet use</td>
<td>.184 (.039)</td>
<td>1.184 (.475)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online political messaging</td>
<td>.166 (.016)</td>
<td>1.166 (.352)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Note

Cell entries for exposure to cross-cutting perspectives are logistic regression coefficients. All entries in parentheses are standard errors.

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

![Fig. 1. Path diagram of mediating effects of online political messaging.](image)

**Note:** The number in the parentheses is the logistic regression coefficient without adding the mediating variable (online messaging) as a control variable.

$p < .05$  
$p < .01$  
$p < .001$
informing citizens, and facilitating political engagement (e.g., Ken- ski & Stroud, 2006). The Internet has been regarded as an impor- tant source of political knowledge and engagement in this line of research because the Internet has easily and cheaply available information (Bimber, 2001). Indeed, social network services such as Facebook also increase the opportunities for individuals to encounter news and information (Nielsen Reports, 2009). This study provides evidence that SNSs may also expand individuals’ exposure to political difference.

More importantly, the contributing role of SNSs to expanding exposure to dissimilar political views works across individuals’ partisanship. While this study hypothesized that partisanship would moderate the effect of SNSs on exposure to political difference, it found instead that partisanship did not moderate the associations between SNSs and exposure to cross-cutting perspectives. This indicates that inadvertent exposure to political difference facilitated by SNSs may happen regardless of individuals’ political orientations. That is, growing social network media can be helpful both for parti- sans and nonpartisans to expand their social boundaries by provid- ing opportunities for information exchange, social interactions, and inadvertent exposure to dissimilar political views.

However, partisanship was found to significantly moderate the effect of online political messaging on exposure to political difference. Partisans tend to expose themselves to dissimilar political views online neither more nor less even if they post political mes- sages, comments, and opinions, while nonpartisans are more likely to expose themselves to political difference if they post such com- ments more often. These mixed results of the moderating role of partisanship suggest that different kinds of media environments may have different consequences for exposure to political difference.

4.1. Limitations and future studies

There were several limitations to this study. Because of the cross-sectional data analyzed, the study could not be fully confi- dent in causal relationships among variables. The study also relied on respondents’ self-reports to measure exposure to cross-cutting political views online, not on actual measurements of respondents’ activities. An experimental setting would allow researchers to measure participants’ actual site-hits, which could be operational- ized as exposure to political views. To overcome these limitations, longitudinal studies and experimental designs should be consid- ered. In addition, this study focused on social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace as a social medium that may facilitate inadvertent exposure to political difference. Future research could also investigate the role of other social media such as Twitter, one of the rapidly growing applications.

Furthermore, although this study took several variables (i.e., demographic variables, news use, partisanship, and partisan Internet use) into account, future studies could expand the current study by examining whether and how other variables relate to individuals’ exposure to political difference. Existing studies has demonstrated that political knowledge and political efficacy are significantly associated with individuals’ heterogeneity of discus- sion networks and exposure to disagreement in political discussion (Brundidge, 2010; Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). In par- ticular, activities on the Internet would be an important consider- ation to understand individuals’ exposure to cross-cutting views as shown by Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) that online group activities – especially, the leisure chat rooms or message board – may con- tribute to increasing exposure to dissimilar political perspectives. Thus individuals’ various online activities that may be associated with exposure to political difference as well as political-orientation variables (e.g., political efficacy and political knowledge) should be taken into consideration for future studies.

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