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Digital Media and Politics: Effects of the Great Information and Communication Divides

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Guest Editors

A substantial body of scholarship has long explored the ways emerging media may foster and also hamper an informed and engaged citizenry. Individually, digital media have become an integral part of citizens' political life as a growing number of people around the world use digital media technologies for information and communication. Collectively, digital media have also constituted an important platform that people use to coordinate among themselves and mobilize each other. Nevertheless, while distributing informative and mobilizing messages, digital media also facilitate socio-political factors that raise concern over the dissemination of misinformation, information divides and political polarization. This article showcases a broad variety of studies included in a special volume encapsulating some of these important issues.

For more than three decades, academic scholarship has explored how digital media and social media have either contributed to or hindered the development of an informed and engaged citizenry (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Boler, 2010; Howard, 2005). The 2016 presidential election in the United States sparked greater attention to several important communication issues.

Digital media have become an integral part of individual citizens' political lives as a growing number of people around the world use digital media technologies for information and communication. Collectively, digital media have also constituted an important platform that people can use to coordinate and mobilize among like-minded individuals. Nevertheless, while distributing informative and mobilizing messages, digital

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media also facilitate socio-political factors that raise concern over the dissemination of misinformation, information divides and political polarization.

In this *Introduction* to the *Special Issue* aiming at addressing the concerns associated with this *Information and Communication Divide*, we highlight some of the most important and relevant aspects of digital media for the research community to consider. From more traditional theoretical accounts such as hostile media perception and agenda setting to cutting-edge theoretical and empirical contributions dealing with news curation, algorithms, and misinformation, this issue showcases ten different studies that provide a solid, diverse, and desperately-needed view of the most pressing theoretical issues in political communication today.

Mobilization and Political Behavior

Recent studies on the internet and political activism have highlighted the significant role of digital media in shaping diverse forms of political participation and mobilizing large-scale social protests around the world (Chen, Chan, & Lee, 2016; Lee & Chan, 2018; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Valenzuela, 2013). Digital media such as Twitter and Facebook provide a platform for cognitive, affective and behavioral connections that enable people to network collaboratively (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). For instance, digital media provide people with news and mobilizing information and allow them to exchange their opinions with many others, motivating them to engage in public activities (Shmargad & Klar, 2019). In addition, digital media content can be quickly updated without expending a significant amount of time, money and physical effort, which enables digital media users to easily pursue their communication goals through different activities online (Montgomery & Xenos, 2008).

Accordingly, digital media can play a significant role in the development of democracy. Bennett and Segerbert's (2012) explication of the logic of connective action and Castells' (2012) definition of networked social movement provide theoretical foundations for many studies that have found positive relationships between digital media use and citizens' participatory behaviors. Trace (big) data generated by digital media use also offer opportunities and open new challenges to observe dynamic relationships in collective action and social movements (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2017; Hargittai, 2015; Jungherr, Schoen, Posegga, & Jürgens, 2017; Wells & Thorson, 2017).

Given that digital media have rapidly integrated different functions and affordances, it is important to revisit the different ways that they have been utilized to understand how the influence of these different applications may vary across platforms, practice and connections to explore new modalities of political engagement and civic practices. It is also crucial to investigate how these new political communication modalities, which are sustained through digitally networked media, may have converged to open an era of an *unedited public sphere* (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019).

Misinformation

Fake news has become a buzzword, especially after the 2016 presidential election in the United States (Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson, & Lazer, 2019; Persily, 2017). The development of digital media technologies and the fragmentation of information have facilitated the spread of misinformation and/or *fake* news. While scholars have strived to clearly define fake news, the concept is not new. The broadcast of a radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' drama *The War of Worlds* represents an example of widespread misinformation as far back as 1938. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) used levels of facticity and deception to provide a typology of fake news definitions for different types of information, such as negative advertising, propaganda, manipulation, fabrication, news satire and news parody. Nevertheless, many questions related to fake news and misinformation in the "post-truth" era remain unanswered (Bode & Vraga, 2015). Continuing development of the definition of fake news, examining the complex factors that have contributed to the rise of misinformation, understanding how misinformation affects civil society and exploring how to combat misinformation and elicit news credibility are all important tasks for scholars in the near future (Oeldorf-Hirsch & DeVoss, 2019).

Information Divide and Political Polarization

While the positive effect of digital media technologies on participatory behaviors has been well documented (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013), a heated debate concerns whether digital media can help to develop a more deliberative society (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Rasmussen, 2013). According to a 2017 Pew Research Center report, two-thirds of U.S. adults get their news from social media. The proliferation of information communication technologies has provided diversified channels where citizens can engage in free and open dialog and access information on various political and social issues (Lyons, 2019). As people are increasingly turning away from mass media to social media as a way of learning news and civic information, new opportunities (Glynn, Huge, & Hoffman, 2012; Lee, Chan, Chen, Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2019; Lee & Ma, 2012) and challenges (Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Casero-Ripollés, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017) will arise. For instance, online social networks influence the type and amount of information to which people are exposed, and social media platforms curate content based on algorithmic information sorting, which elicits critical issues that affect the development of the democratic process (Anderson, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, & Diehl, 2019; Stanoevska-Slabeva, Sacco, & Giardina, 2012).

How much the changing boundaries of social media and the transforming dynamics of digital networks facilitate the information divide and influence individuals' political

information sharing, conversation and engagement will become an influential line of inquiry for years to come (Chen, 2018; Diakopoulos & Koliska, 2017). Our current media environment produces a paradox in which citizens could be immersed in larger, more diverse, and heterogenous networks of political discussion and information while at the same time also being exposed to potential filter bubbles and echo chambers (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019). Scholars need to systematically examine the factors and conditions under which the information flow and network structure in social media encourage citizens across the ideological spectrum to exchange opinions. This will provide significant implications for ideological and partisan political divides and social change (Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2016).

Articles in This Issue

This special issue brings scholars together to consider the changing dynamic of digital media in the current political landscape. The articles presented here analyze different communication issues through theory-informed empirical studies with different methodological approaches. The special issue begins with Weeks, Kim, Hahn, Diehl and Kwak's study on the *perception* of media bias. They investigated whether and how social media use contributes to hostile media perceptions. Analyzing two-wave panel survey data collected in the United States during the 2016 presidential election, their findings suggest that following politicians' social feeds can lead to hostile media perception. The effect functions by triggering followers' enthusiasm about the supported candidate and anger about the opposing candidate. These findings raise concern about increasing reliance on politicians' social media feeds as sources of campaign information, given that political campaigns can use social media platforms to stir political emotions, which could lead to perceptions of media bias.

Another important aspect of misinformation online does not deal with whether or not it exists, how it is disseminated or its effects, but rather, how can we correct these views and contribute to lower misinformation levels online (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). In this vein, Vraga, Kim and Cook conducted a survey experiment to assess the effectiveness of logic-based or humor-based corrections of misinformation in influencing credibility ratings for inaccurate posts on Twitter and reducing misperceptions across the issues of climate change, gun control and HPV vaccination. They found that the effectiveness of corrections of misinformation varies across topics, with the two types of corrections reducing misperceptions only for HPV vaccination. This study offers a valuable insight into therapeutic inoculation as a correction strategy and suggests that its effects depend on issue domain, the type of correction approach (logic versus humor) and pre-existing misperceptions about the issue.

Within the scope of the prior work by Vraga and colleagues, but drawing on the persuasion knowledge model, Amazeen and Bucy addressed how procedural news

knowledge (PNK), a more nuanced understanding of the news, may confer resistance to mediated disinformation efforts. Utilizing data from two national surveys in the United States, they found that PNK facilitates recognition of disinformation and affects consequent coping responses by prompting counterargument. PNK can function as an implicit forewarning mechanism and a vital cognitive resource. It can also protect people from covert persuasion and work against media disinformation.

Park, Straubhaar and Strover conceptualized the *ambivalent* construct of technological embeddedness, considering the relationship between technological competence and technological dependence. Their analysis of survey data demonstrated that technological competence was positively related to having higher information literacy self-efficacy, but youth dependence, one of the three technological dependence constructs was negatively related. The results also implied that each of these factors can be interrelated or interdependent in systematic ways. This study advances the existing literature by relating the embeddedness framework to users' information literacy self-efficacy and trust in information sources.

Park and Kaye incorporated news curation, or the reconstructing, reformulating, reframing and sharing of political news through social media, to the Orientation-Stimuli-Reasoning-Orientation-Response model in a social media context (see also Chan, Chen, & Lee, 2017; Cho et al., 2009). Drawing on a national survey in South Korea, they found that both news curation and elaboration play mediating roles in the relationship between social media use for news and political knowledge. They also suggested that political interest and efficacy play significant roles in enhancing the association between social media use for news and political knowledge. Their study contributes to the literature on political learning on social media by illuminating the direct and indirect roles of news curation in the mediation models.

Turning again to the topic of media bias, Hedding, Miller, Abdenour and Blankenship analyze media bias from the perspective of media content and media ownership. They conducted a content analysis to investigate the difference between Sinclair and non-Sinclair stations' political news coverage. Although the amount of political coverage was similar between Sinclair and non-Sinclair stations, the ways stations approached these stories, such as how political issues are framed, what topics are covered, and how ideological and partisan sources are deployed, are different. Sinclair stations were more likely to deliver stories with a Palace Intrigue frame compared to non-Sinclair stations. Furthermore, Sinclair stations report stories with focuses on government actions instead of specific government policies and are more inclined to provide a partisan point of view and use favorable sources which could potentially harm the engaged citizenry. The findings highlight the concern that media conglomerates could have the potential to have professional, ideological and operational influence on how local news outlets produce news.

Price and Kaufhold focused on the immigration issue and examined the relationships between border-state residency, party identity, selective exposure and support for immigration. Using a secondary dataset and an original survey conducted in the

states of Ohio and Texas, they found that Democrats are more likely to use a variety of media platforms, while Republicans were more likely to segregate themselves to like-minded media and to avoid traditional objective sources like national newspapers or broadcast TV news. They also provided evidence that exposure to counter-attitudinal news outlets did not diminish partisan attitudes, while exposure to attitude-consistent media validated them. In addition, party identity was a stronger predictor of immigration attitudes than media consumption habits. Border-state residency, however, did not moderate attitudes about immigration.

Applying the network agenda-setting theory and adopting supervised machine learning and semantic network analysis with large-scale data, Chen, Su and Chen examined Chinese nationalism discourse on Weibo, the most popular Chinese social media platform. This study is an exploratory attempt to understand the different roles of online actors in setting the agenda, which could prompt a bottom-up model of nation building. Chen et al. explored different Weibo accounts including organizational accounts, individual influencers' accounts and ordinary individual accounts and found that media agenda influences individuals' agenda, while the construction of nationalism follows a bottom-up direction.

Drawing on networked social influence theory (Friedkin, 2006; Li, 2013), Saffer, Yang, and Qu investigated whether general network characteristics, opinion climates and network heterogeneity influence individuals' perceptions of a politically involved corporation and intentions to engage in consumer activism. Using the case of Uber's inadvertent involvement in U.S. President Donald Trump's "Muslim travel ban" as the context and an egocentric survey design, they showcase that ethnic diversity of discussion partners and opinion heterogeneity influenced the perceptions of Uber's corporate image and likelihood to engage in consumer activism.

The last article in this volume is comparative study that examines the extent to which news media use and press freedom in eight countries would influence education-generated participation inequality. Ahmed and Cho emphasized both content and platform-specific measures of media use and suggested that the impact of information uses of different media is not the same. They documented that the informational use of news content from print newspaper, radio and social media sources increases the likelihood of political participation, and the positive relationships between news content use from the radio and social media sources and political participation are stronger for higher- than lower-educated groups. Press freedom is also a significant contextual factor reinforcing the role of TV news, print news and social media use in participatory inequality.

This special issue invites greater scholarly attention to the transformation of digital affordances, the allocation of political resources, the diffusion of political discourse, and the structure of political opportunity in the digital age.

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