Social Media Supporting Political Deliberation Across Multiple Public Spheres: Towards Depolarization

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative study of social media use for political deliberation by 21 U.S. citizens. In observing people's interactions in the "sprawling public sphere" across multiple social media tools in both political and non-political spaces, we found that social media supported the interactional dimensions of deliberative democracy—the interaction with media and the interaction between people. People used multiple tools through which they: were serendipitously exposed to diverse political information, constructed diverse information feeds, disseminated diverse information, and engaged in respectful and reasoned political discussions with diverse audiences. When people's civic agency was inhibited when using a tool, they often adopted, or switched to, alternative media that could afford what they were trying to achieve. Contrary to the polarization perspective, we find that people were purposefully seeking diverse information and discussants. Some individuals altered their views as a result of the interactions they were having in the online public sphere.

Author Keywords

Social media; public sphere; depolarization; multi-mediation

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.3 [Computers and Society]: Organizational Impacts – Computer-Supported cooperative work.

INTRODUCTION

Social media, like Social Networking Sites (SNSs), blogs and YouTube, have become popular online destinations in recent years. Researchers have studied the use of social media, with recent emphasis on SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter, from a variety of perspectives, e.g. "social searching" [22] and social capital [12].

The study of the use of social media, with respect to the political deliberation process, has become an active research topic in the CSCW and CHI communities [e.g. 17, 28, 34, 42]. The major activities that constitute deliberative democracy—information sharing, discussion, and public

participation—may now be facilitated by online media as citizens can gather together virtually, irrespective of geographic location, and engage in information exchange and discussion as long as they have an Internet connection.

Recent work has found that the political deliberation emerging online is complex [27, 29, 30]. Some researchers have found that people seek diverse information and discussion [38], whereas other scholars fear that Internet will lead to "polarization" as users will connect exclusively with like-minded others [16]. The latter behavior can lead to the reaffirmation and strengthening of previously held views [40].

We believe that the affordances of social media provide a space through which citizens can engage in meaningful political interactions. In this paper, we describe how people use various social media to interact in the public sphere by seeking and disseminating diverse information and opinions, as well as engaging in rational discussions with diverse audiences—only we turn our analytic attention to how people participate in deliberative activities across multiple public spheres (both political and non-political) available through several social media. We show how, contrary to the polarization perspective, people were seeking diversity in information, opinions and discussants. We report how the interactions people were having even led some individuals to alter their perspectives on political issues like civic matters, politicians and public policy.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Deliberative democracy—also known as political deliberation—is a process where citizens voluntarily and freely participate in discussions on public issues [8]. The notion of deliberative democracy finds its roots in the utopian ideal of democracy where citizens engage and talk with one another in a civil manner. In this respect, political deliberation is a discursive system where people share information about public affairs, talk politics, form opinions, and participate in political processes [8, 19].

Deliberative democracy can only exist in the public sphere—"a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" [18, 19, 20]. As theorized by Habermas [18], the public sphere is a democratic space that facilitates open, reasoned and reflexive interaction and communication among different kinds of publics. A public

sphere only functions properly when people with different views and backgrounds are able to freely express themselves, engage in rational discussion, and disseminate information.

Recent work has built on Habermas' definition by conceptualizing the public sphere as consisting of three dimensions: structures, representations and interactions [10]. Structures consist of formal institutional features, e.g. how media organizations are structured. Representations refer to the output of the media, like campaign materials. Interactions consist of two aspects, which will be the focus of this paper.

The first aspect of interaction deals with how materials made available by the media are communicated from the media to citizens and between citizens. The interaction between media and citizens focuses on how people acquire and encounter information (i.e. through the media or through other citizens), and the ways in which individuals share information and opinions with others. The second feature of interaction deals with the "deliberative" aspect of democracy that focuses on the rational discussions that emerge between citizens. Thus, three forms of interaction emerge in the public sphere: the acquisition of information and opinion, the dissemination of information and opinion, and the discussions that take place between people.

In further building on Habermas' vision, Dahlgren [11], in defining what he refers to as civic culture, contends that there exist six pre-conditions of mutual reciprocity for interaction in the public sphere, including: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices, and identities.

Knowledge refers to the idea that a citizens' ability to participate in the public sphere is predicated upon their ability to acquire knowledge or disseminate knowledge. *Values* refer to a citizens' ability to engage in the public sphere as dictated by the values of openness, reciprocity, discussion and accountability. *Trust* deals with how individuals must be able to adequately engage with people they may or may not know personally, but feel that they can have a satisfactory exchange. There must exist *spaces* (offline and online) through which people can meet and discuss political candidates and issues. *Practices* refer to the set of stable, individual and collective practices in which participation can be embodied, e.g. voting. Finally, *identities* involve the concept that people have an awareness of the characteristics that comprise their political beliefs and attitudes, and that they have the right to those attitudes and beliefs.

When any of these preconditions are compromised, civic agency—people's ability to interact and participate in the public sphere—can be inhibited. For example, if a conflict exists in the value systems of participants in the public sphere, agency can be constrained as people may be unwilling to discuss political issues with people who are not respectful of differing opinions.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PUBLIC SPHERES

Social media can be viewed as a new type of online public sphere [6, 10, 14]. The Pew Internet and American Life project has shown increasing use of the Internet and social media for political activity [23, 32]. Raine and Smith [32] found that 25% of their interview respondents used social media to discuss or debate political issues with others. Thirty percent of respondents said that their friends post occasionally about politics and 25% said that they have become more involved politically as the result of information in their social networking feeds. Other recent work has explored the emergence of the public sphere in online spaces devoted to political discussion like political blogs [1, 13, 41], political discussion forums [31], political videos posted on YouTube [24, 25], and political and media accounts on SNSs [17, 33, 42, 44].

Amongst public sphere scholars, there is a widely shared view that the Internet serves as an "echo chamber" in which people tend to seek political information that is aligned with their beliefs, or discuss political issues and candidates with citizens who are also in support of those issues and candidates [e.g. 2, 16, 40, 43]. For example, in their study of political blogs, Adamic and Glance [1] reported that the majority of blogs in their sample only linked to blogs that shared the same political ideology. Similarly, Gilbert Bergstrom, and Karahalios [16], in analyzing blog comments, found that blogs were echo chambers: comments were more likely to be in agreement with the original blog post.

Other researchers, however, have argued that online discussion and debate is more complex and diverse [21, 27, 38, 39]. For example, in-depth interview data of online discussion group members suggests that Internet users do seek diverse information [38]. In a large-scale survey conducted during the 2004 election season, Horrigan, Garrett, and Resnick [21] found that Internet users did not filter out viewpoints contradictory to their own, and, as a result, were more aware of diverse political arguments than non-Internet users. Others have reported mixed results. Munson and Resnick [27] found that online reading behavior was user dependent—some people seek diverse information ("challenge-seeking") while others only seek information that reinforces their individual beliefs ("challenge averse"). Papacharissi [30] argues that online media are both an augmented public sphere that broadens the types of information available to participants and also a potentially polarizing public sphere. Similarly, Gentzkow and Shapiro [15] found ideological segregation online to be worse than print media, but not as polarized as Sunstein feared.

INTERACTIONS IN THE SPRAWLING PUBLIC SPHERE

Whereas the majority of scholarship has focused on the political deliberation that emerges in online spaces dedicated to politics, few studies have examined the political discussions and information exchange that emerges

in non-political spaces [e.g. 3, 7, 28]. Chadwick [7] asserts that researchers should focus on the deliberation that emerges in non-political spaces, or "third spaces," as the online political interactions may more closely resemble what naturally unfolds in the physical world.

Research has shown that users of social media are exposed to diverse political information [3] and discussions [28] in non-political spaces. For example, in their study of blogging activity, Munson and Resnick [28] reported that 25% of the discussions taking place in non-political blogs were political in nature. Since they usually cater to specific ideological groups, online public spheres devoted to political discussion may be more prone to polarization. Conversely, political discussion in non-political arenas might be less polarized and possibly more conducive to reasoned consideration of alternative viewpoints.

It is important to understand the ways in which people exchange political information and opinion, and discuss politics, in online public spheres not specifically devoted to politics (in addition to political ones), as people may have access to a more diverse audience with more varying opinions. Some non-political online spaces are highly personal in that they contain friends and close acquaintances (e.g. Facebook) whereas others are less personal in that they many connect people with weak ties (e.g. Twitter).

Papacharissi [29] introduces a new way of thinking about the public sphere within the context of social media, as various tools are hybrid environments that are private with public features. She defines the "private sphere" as an online media space that provides people with the autonomy that is most associated with physical private spaces, but with the potential audience of a public act. For example, though blogging is often done as a "narcissistic" act of self-expression, it may still contribute to public discourse. The unique "hybridity" of digital media allows for different types of expression in different spaces. The proliferation of social media has thus enabled people to interact with multiple audiences in multiple expressive manners [29]—in a more private and personal manner as well as in a more public and impersonal manner. Both types of expressive manners can influence public discourse. Thus, people's interactions across media might have a democratizing value [29].

The hybridity of social media might influence the degree to which people are exposed to diverse ideas or the degree to which they engage in discussion with people holding alternative viewpoints. For example, in relationship-based networks like Facebook, people may be more inclined to listen to and engage with their audience, or to acknowledge different perspectives. Conversely, Facebook users may wish not to share their political opinions in what they consider to be a private space to keep people in their network from "unfriending" them or hiding their newsfeed activity [e.g. 32].

Recent work has attempted to characterize the political discussions that emerge in third spaces—and preliminary results have found the interactions to be diverse. Conover Ratkiewicz, Fancisco, Goncalves, Flammini, and Menczer [9], in analyzing over 250,000 tweets from the six weeks leading to the 2010 U.S. congressional midterm election, found that the network of political retweets exhibited a highly segregated partisan structure with limited connectivity between right- and left-leaning users. However, with respect to user mentions, users were targeting people with differing opinions for purposes of discussion. Similarly, Morgan, Lampe and Shafiq [26] found that Twitterers disseminate cross-ideological information.

To our knowledge, few studies have looked at how users appropriate multiple social media for purposes of political deliberation. In evaluating the public sphere by taking into account online media, Dahlgren [10] re-characterized the public sphere as having a "sprawling" characteristic—it is spread out across various online tools. Considerable cross-pollenization may occur across the various public spheres (political and non-political) as users engage with others using multiple technologies. For example, people may discuss politics with a diverse audience in one medium and disseminate links and opinions in another. Rather than study one public sphere at a time, we turn our analytic attention to the ways in which any given user appropriates one or many social media for political deliberation.

We hypothesize that the affordances of social media can support the interactional dimensions of the public sphere—access to information from media and other citizens, the dissemination of information and opinions, and discussion between citizens. We further propose that each medium may support interaction in varying ways which are relative to the affordances of each tool. Whereas social media can support interaction, although it was not a part of our hypothesis, we believe that the ongoing interactions that emerge in these networked publics between people and the media, and between people, can have a depolarizing effect on the public sphere, for several reasons. Firstly, people can interact with media from diverse perspectives outside of their own political ideology. Secondly, people can interact with other citizens who may or may not share the same views. Lastly, people may be introduced to political issues through media and other citizens that they may have otherwise never come across.

In this study, we utilize qualitative techniques to build on previous work by exploring how individuals use one or more social media tools to engage in the political deliberation process in both political and non-political spaces. We adopt the view that people's deliberative activities are multi-mediated [5] as people can use multiple media to engage in any given activity. Depending on how a tool is instantiated in practice (by a user), if an individual feels that they lack agency (when a pre-condition of civic

culture is not met) within one public sphere, they may adopt, or switch to, alternative social media through which they can seek information, disseminate information, and engage in rational discussions.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger research program to understand how people use social media as part of the political deliberation process [e.g. 33]. Our data is based on a longitudinal interview study with United States citizens who already used social media to learn about and discuss politics.

The goal of the study was to understand how politically involved social media users engaged in online deliberation, and to that end we recruited social media users interested in politics. We found informants through multiple seeds with the intention of limiting sampling biases. Firstly, the study team recruited subjects through personal contacts consisting of friends and family (1 subject). Secondly, we posted recruitment fliers on and around the college campus to seek additional interview subjects (5 subjects). Thirdly, we enlisted informants through a newsletter distributed by a local news agency (9 subjects). Lastly, we recruited participants through online postings on Twitter, Facebook, and Craig's List (5 subjects). We then used a snowball sampling technique [4] to recruit additional informants (1 subject). All subjects were given a $20 dollar Amazon gift card as remuneration for their participation in the study. The study team maintained a shared list of the volunteers who responded to our inquiries, which we used to contact people to schedule interviews.

We conducted twenty-one semi-structured interviews (interviews are ongoing) with unique informants before the November 2012 US election (beginning in May), and six follow-up interviews after the election (beginning in February 2013). Interview questions were open-ended. We allowed our informants to guide the inquiry while probing them for additional information. We purposefully designed the protocol to be general because we did not want to influence informants' responses.

We first asked our informants to identify, from the social media platforms they had integrated into their daily lives, which technologies they used to engage in the political deliberation process. In order to better understand the different uses of each respective technology and the underlying personal motivations for the use of each tool, we asked the same set of questions for each medium that they said they used while asking people to provide us with relevant examples. We asked people to identify the activities they engaged in, how they engaged in those activities (i.e. which features they used to engage in the activities they previously described), who (if anyone) they deliberated with (and for what reason they did or did not engage with others), what their level of participation was in the activities they described (and for what reason(s) they did or did not participate), how often and for how long they

used a given tool, and the motivation(s) for using a respective technology. We then asked our informants to describe the reason(s), if any, which motivated their use of multiple social media for political deliberation.

Interviews were conducted with individuals living in the continental United States and its territories. We conducted both face-to-face and long-distance interviews. In person interviews took place on the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa campus. For people who were either unable to travel to the university or lived in the continental U.S., we used the telephone or Skype™. Interviews lasted anywhere from forty minutes to two and a half hours in length. With participant permission, following the interviews the first author added participants' usernames to his social media accounts to make general observations about participants' online activity and verify the validity of their personal recollections and, in turn, our findings. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The lead author coded interview transcripts using Atlas.ti—a qualitative data analysis workbench. Utilizing an approach from grounded theory [37], we first used open coding to identify general themes made explicit during interviews, which went through numerous iterations as we developed new codes, evaluated existing codes, and collapsed/expanded codes following each subsequent interview. We then reduced our codes under axial coding to generate the themes presented in this paper.

Participants and Social Media

Our informants were diverse with respect to their age, gender and education levels, as well as their educational backgrounds and work roles. Our eleven male and ten female participants ranged from eighteen to sixty-seven years of age. We interviewed people who had never attended or graduated from college, as well as undergraduate and graduate students in various disciplines like Computer Science and English. Our informants were also diverse with respect to their political orientations—11 reported being Democrat, 7 reported being Independent, and 3 reported being Republican. We also interviewed people who were working in various professions, e.g. as professors and entrepreneurs. All of our informants integrated at least one social media tool into their lives.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the primary social media platforms that emerged from our interviews, the number of participants that used each social media tool, and which participants used (or did not use) each social media tool.

Facebook is a SNS through which people maintain a semi-public profile. Facebook users can construct a network of friends, whereby the act of adding a friend is mutual. More recently, Facebook implemented the ability for people to categorize their connections into groups. Users can post "status" updates to their profiles, and these updates appear in the Facebook "newsfeed"—the main page consisting of a stream of posts from friends. Users can peruse this stream

to obtain information and opinions from their connections, or to engage in lively discussions with friends and friends-of-friends. Users can also visit a friends' personal page and initiate a discussion. Facebook users can join public and private groups that can be interest based, e.g. video games, or person-based, e.g. Barack Obama, where people can discuss a wide array of issues and topics (including politics). Users can also "like" public profiles to receive updates in their respective newsfeed.

Twitter is a communication platform that allows users to broadcast 140-character messages (tweets) to other users who subscribe to their accounts (followers). Twitter does not employ a mutual relationship-based dynamic. For example, user A can *follow* user B, but it is not required that user B *follow* user A. Twitter users (twitterers) receive tweets from the set of users they elect to follow. Thus, twitterers can follow politicians and other political groups to receive timely updates. Furthermore, promoted to enhance the searchability of tweets, the #hashtag convention is now used by twitterers to mark up tweets with thematic keywords of their choice. For twitterers whose accounts are not explicitly set as private, every tweet is also posted to a public, searchable timeline. The retweet emerged as a forwarding technique whereby twitterers pass on tweets with attribution to the original author. Twitterers began to use the @ sign preceding another user's account name as a way of mentioning or addressing tweets to a specific user. This convention allows users to engage in one-on-one, yet still public, conversation.

Google+ is a social media platform that allows people to follow others and place them in "circles" based on self-created categories. Users can share information and posts of unlimited length, and target their posts to all of their connections or to a specific circle (or circles). People have access to a "stream" (similar to the Facebook newsfeed) where they can view what their connections are saying and engage in discussions, and users have the ability to filter their streams based on circles. Users can also "follow" other users without placing them in circles. Like with Facebook, Google+ users can join and create groups where people can engage in discourse.

Blogs (or weblogs) allow users to create a profile (anonymous or not) through which they can write posts of an unspecified length. People can peruse the blogosphere to obtain information and opinions from other citizens as well as politicians and media sources. Through blogs, people can engage in discussions with other people through a comments section on a post-to-post basis. People from anywhere in the world can comment on a blog post (barring privacy settings), providing their perspective on issues, sharing similar experiences, and so on.

YouTube is an account-based platform that enables people to create videos that they can, in turn, share with a global audience. People also have the ability to search for and watch videos, as well as engage in lively discussions with others. Users must be logged into their account (which is now linked to people's Google profile) to post videos or engage in discussions, though they do not need to log in to watch videos and view comments.

Online forums like Reddit are social media that allow people to create posts (typically anonymous or via an alias) based on various topics. People are free to peruse the political postings of others, as well as interact with one another, and discuss a wide array of topics with a global audience. In order to make contributions, however, users must have an account.

Social Media	Number of Users [Informants (p)]
Facebook	21 [p1 – p21]
Twitter	17 [excluding: p4, p8, p12, p17]
Google+	5 [p5, p9, p19, p20, p21]
Blogs	7 [p3, p9, p11, p15, p16, p19, p21]
YouTube	11 [excluding: p4, p5, p8, p9, p10, p11, p12, p13, p17, p20]
Online Forums (e.g. Reddit)	4 [p9, p15, p19, p21]

Table 2: Social Media used by Informants

From our sample, three informants used a single medium for political deliberation, whereas the remaining adopted two or more (see Table 2). Our informants described using social media multiple times a day, from half an hour to several hours in total. They were using these online technologies on their personal and work computers, as well as on their mobile phones when commuting.

DELIBERATION IN THE ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

We found many cases where our informants adopted new media, or switched to media that they already used, in order to seek and consume information, disseminate information and opinions, and engage in political discourse. Thirteen of our informants reported adopting new media and constructing networks specifically to engage in the necessary interactions that constitute a Habermasean public sphere, like open and rational discourse (whereas others switched to other media they had already adopted for political contexts).

Through informants' accounts we show how people interacted in the "sprawling public sphere" [10] available through multiple social media. We learned that informants were (1) being exposed to a wide variety of political topics from diverse perspectives and populations through social media, (2) using social media to disseminate diverse information and opinions, and (3) seeking out reasoned and respectful discussions. When people found that their ability to interact was limited in one medium, they often adopted, or switched to, different tools to maintain civic agency. Furthermore, contrary to the view that social media is associated with polarization [e.g. 40], our results show that people were acquiring and disseminating diverse information and opinions, as well as interacting with diverse audiences (as opposed to only interacting with like-

minded others). The interactions that people were having in the public sphere led some individuals to change their political attitudes and beliefs.

From Serendipity to Organized Information Acquisition
Our informants reported using either one medium, or a combination of media like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, online news sites and YouTube, through which they could obtain political news and information. When people's civic agency was constrained in any given tool for information acquisition, they often adopted or switched to other media through which they could seek information more effectively.

With respect to obtaining information, many of our informants reported starting with Facebook and then evolving to use of alternative tools after determining that Facebook was lacking in some way (i.e. affordances or perception of the tool itself). In fact, the majority of our informants reported not actively seeking political information through Facebook initially. Whereas some individuals were receiving campaign updates from politicians' pages, they often commented on how the information that was made public did not help them with respect to the deliberation process as they could only receive "trivial updates". People also felt that politicians' pages were homogenous [33].

Similar to the way in which bloggers can be exposed to political information in blogs not devoted to politics [28], all of our informants reported being exposed to political information when scanning through their newsfeeds. They described how people often posted opinions about political issues and topics, as well as links to political materials outside of Facebook, e.g. news sites. In other words, people were being exposed to political information in a serendipitous fashion—through the status updates posted by members of their Facebook network. As explained by p3:

"Right now, I encounter [political information] just by accident, or just by scanning through my newsfeed..."

Our informants described how they often first learned of current events when scanning through their Facebook newsfeeds well before information was made available through traditional media sources like the television. Furthermore, they were being introduced to new and familiar views and perspectives on common topics, to problems and events with which they were unfamiliar, and to global perspectives on issues that were happening worldwide. Not all of our participants were receptive to the information being posted by people in their networks. Three informants reported "unfriending", "unfollowing", or hiding a friend's feed to avoid "listening to recurring polarizing political posts" [32].

After this serendipitous exposure to political information persisted, the majority of our informants claimed to have, at some point, shifted their use of Facebook to actively peruse their newsfeeds and seek out political news and opinions.

Three of our informants reported using Facebook as their only source for political information.

For example, as described by a male journalist (p12), Facebook was an all-encompassing deliberative tool. He described how although he was unable to structure his information feed and filter out non-political topics, he did not mind spending the necessary time in order to "stay up to date with [his] newsfeed".

However, with respect to purposefully seeking political information, eight participants reported that the mixture of political and non-political topics that comprised their newsfeeds, and/or the inadequate search functionality built into the tool, limited their ability to effectively seek political information. As described by p1:

"...although I still use Facebook daily to seek political news, it is no longer the only media I use... it's so hard to filter out the political information... from all the... 'cute cat photos'..."

Furthermore, nine informants described how the way in which Facebook was tied to their real world identity further restricted its function as a tool for obtaining political news and information from multiple perspectives, thus limiting their civic agency. Before the functionality to "follow" was added, in order to receive newsfeed updates from political candidates and news media agencies, Facebook users had to "Like" a respective political candidate or news agency's Facebook profile. Our informants explained how they were unable to "Like" candidates or news agencies that did not align with their personal views as this practice was tied to their personal identities. As described by p3:

"Facebook to me is way more personal. I can't go and 'Like' a candidate's site on Facebook that I don't align with politically. I have a pretty large network on Facebook... I don't want them to see that I'm following the 'other' side... it really restricts me because I can't follow those other views so easily [and receive their updates]..."

In order to receive timely and diverse political information, fifteen of our informants adopted or switched to alternative media like Twitter and Google+ to self-organize and create more structured political newsfeeds to counter the lack of civic agency in Facebook. Importantly, our informants were structuring their networks to include information and opinions from people and media that did not align with their personal political views—a major component of depolarization.

One informant (p15), a male graduate student in Computer Science, described how his Facebook network was homogenous by design. He felt it was difficult using Facebook to actively seek political information as the majority of his newsfeed was personal in nature; though when his friends shared their political opinions he most always found himself to be in agreement as they were all "left leaning." He was also uncomfortable following more

conservative media and politicians through Facebook because of the misalignment with his personal views. In order to expose himself to diverse opinions and a wider spectrum of information, he re-oriented his Twitter use (which he had initially adopted to follow the "local food truck" scene) to include media networks, politicians, and radio personalities across the political spectrum.

Similarly, a female informant (p19) who was employed as a service administrator, described how "horrible Facebook's search interface is". She had a difficult time filtering through her feed, especially when she was looking for political information. In seeking a better political information environment she first adopted Twitter to create an organized newsfeed. In finding the way in which Twitter presents information to be "too overwhelming", she began using Google+. Using the circles feature of Google+, she crafted a robust information environment. She created several circles for unique groups based on political ideology, e.g. conservative and liberal media, and would traverse her circles to peruse political information from multiple perspectives.

Through serendipity and the organization of diverse networks for political information and opinions, people were establishing common ground with others who held opposing views, reinforcing their existing views after better understanding "the other side" and, in some cases, formulating new opinions on issues that were counter to their former beliefs.

One informant who only used Facebook (p4) described how, as a conservative, she could not "wrap her head around President Obama's foreign policy." As a Republican living in Hawaii, which is a left-leaning state, the majority of her Facebook friends were liberal. She began to notice that many of her friends were often posting articles and opinions on foreign policy issues, and over time she began to better understand why people supported Obama's policies. Similarly, as she was exposed to other issues through Facebook, she even better understood the American president as she could see how his policies were affecting her friends who were not as financially stable.

Another informant (p6), who claimed to have changed his stance on issues like the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") as a result of his exposure to alternative perspectives, described how his interactions often helped him develop new political views on various issues:

"On Twitter I purposefully follow people and news sources with different viewpoints. For example, one user I try to [follow] is True Conservative... although I'm liberal. Then I'll go through the links they provide and look for stuff. I get a sense of what people are saying from a perspective that's not my own. Occasionally it'll even help me change my opinions."

Our informants were being exposed to diverse information, firstly, through serendipity, and secondly, by purposefully

constructing diverse information networks. Contrary to the polarization perspective, people were actively seeking information from different perspectives. Some of our informants altered their beliefs as a result of this exposure to alternative viewpoints from multiple political angles.

Multiple Networks for Information and Opinion Dissemination
Our informants reported using either one medium, or a combination of media through which they disseminate political information and opinions. When people felt that their agency to post was restricted, they adopted and/or switched to alternative media.

Eighteen informants reported using one or more social media to engage in online posting behavior. They were posting information about political candidates, civic issues, or political events that were taking place locally, nationally and globally. We found that people were posting information they obtained from other individuals or news agencies within the same media, e.g. sharing a friend's Facebook status, or posting information they had come across in one medium, such as Twitter, to other media like Google+ and Twitter. As such, people had access to various networks through which they could obtain and, in turn, disseminate information and opinions. Importantly, people were disseminating cross-ideological information.

For six of our informants, Facebook served as the primary vehicle for sharing information. Using the status functionality within the medium, people posted opinions, factual links, and factual links combined with self-interpretations about political issues and candidates. They explained that the personal nature of Facebook made them feel more comfortable posting information and opinions from all sides of the political spectrum because the presence of family and friends provided them with what they felt was a "safe environment." Furthermore, they wished to expose their closest connections to more diverse opinions and information that they may not otherwise see.

For twelve informants, however, the presence of family and friends on Facebook limited their ability to share information and opinions. The factors dissuading them from posting on Facebook were mostly consistent with what has been reported in other studies [36]. Specifically, people wanted to avoid upsetting others or getting into arguments.

The way in which Facebook was tied to their real world identity limited their civic agency with respect to disseminating information and opinions. People described a reverse form of identity management—one associated with conflicting value systems. Whereas most studies have reported that individuals limit what they share when a misalignment exists between what they wanted to post and how they want to portray themselves [e.g. 36], our informants reported not posting because of a misalignment between what they were posting and other people's

expectations of what they should and should not post. As described by one informant (p10):

"With Facebook there's a stamp of personal convention on what you post. I'm extremely liberal and if I would post something from the conservative slant because I felt people should be aware of that side… I would receive a TON of negative feedback… I was going against their expectations of me… so I stopped posting things like that there."

In order to freely share political information and opinions irrespective of ideology, twelve informants began using one or more media tools like Twitter, Blogs, and Google+. Our informants reported that the impersonal nature of other media made them feel like they could freely disseminate information across the political spectrum. As described by one informant:

"People understand that Twitter is a broadcast medium… even when my family and friends who are following me see what I'm tweeting and retweeting, they don't take issue… they know Twitter is just about getting the word out… what you say isn't tied to who you are as a person."

People were not restricting what they were posting to any one medium. Rather, our informants wanted to reach as broad of an audience as possible while being cognizant of the personal or impersonal nature of the networks they were reaching. One informant (p21) used several media, including Facebook, Twitter, Google+, blogs and Reddit, and targeted his posts based on where he believed he would make the most profound impact. He described this activity as "where to post calculus":

"Well… with Facebook, I had a lot of negative responses in the past. I'd post political stuff that… people thought I shouldn't be posting… So now, whenever I am going to post something political I play 'where to post calculus.' I have to carefully think about what I'm posting. Does it align with people's expectations of me? Where can I potentially make the largest impact and reach the most people? So without fail I post to Twitter because I can post anything [there], then to Google+ because I can choose which circles to target, and maybe my blog… in the end when I get to Facebook… not much ever makes it…"

Another informant (p16), a female entrepreneur and social media advocate living in Hawaii, described how although she felt limited when posting on Facebook because her friends and family always seemed to "get upset with [her] posts," she had adopted other tools through which she could disseminate information. She often targeted specific groups of people with her posts based on potential impact. For example, she used Twitter to disseminate political information and opinions that were of interest to a national audience, whereas she used Google+ to post information and opinions to various circles she had created, e.g. location based, with whom she felt comfortable sharing information.

By disseminating cross-ideological information and opinions to other citizens via the online public spheres available through social media, people were purposefully trying to expose others to new information as well as interpretations that were counter to their personal viewpoints, which is a major component of depolarization. Informants were attempting to help people understand and accept the varying beliefs of others by exposing them to news articles and opinions from media and lay citizens.

For example, one informant (p10), a writer and Native American political activist living in Idaho, described how he used Twitter not only to follow what the news media and public were saying on all sides of the spectrum, but also to retweet those links to disseminate that argument to his followers. He felt that he was trying to "add to people's understanding of issues by exposing them to different interpretations."

Some informants were disseminating information and opinions to try and persuade others to change their views.

One informant (p11) described how he was overly cautious when posting political links or opinions on Facebook. He did not wish to offend anyone, nor did he want his friends and family to, at times, know his true "feelings". However, he wanted to have "some kind of effect and help people understand other perspectives other than their own" and, as such, began using Twitter and blogs to "try and change people's minds."

Respectful and Reasoned Political Engagement with Diverse Audiences

Social media enabled our informants to have access to a public, heterogeneous group of people with whom they could discuss politics on a more frequent basis. Importantly, people reported using social media to seek out diverse audiences with whom they could engage in "rational" and "reasoned" discussions. When one medium did not provide an environment conducive to constructive discussion with people holding different views—when civic agency was restricted—informants adopted and/or switched to other media.

For three informants, social media did not provide a public sphere through which everyone could interact with others. One described how he has tried "every single social media available" and has not yet found a suitable discussion environment. Another informant explained that she does not feel comfortable discussing politics online due to a lack of personal political knowledge (related to political efficacy). Another informant reported purposefully following and having political discussions with other Twitterers who were aligned with his personal political views.

With respect to the public spaces devoted to the discussion of politics, like politician Facebook pages or the public discussions that take place in the comments sections of YouTube and online media like CNN, the majority of our informants described the discussions in these public spaces

as being highly polarized and filled with messages of flaming or support [33]. As such, many did not frequent these interaction spaces because they did not facilitate healthy, constructive interaction as there existed a misalignment in people's values.

Despite these negative accounts, eighteen of our informants described having fruitful discussions in the public spheres available through social media. They sought discussants who respected their values and political identities. However, people had varying experiences depending on the tool they used and they made technological choices accordingly.

Six of our informants reported using Facebook for the purpose of political discussion. Due to the personal nature of Facebook, they were more cognizant of their audience and were more sensitive in how they approached the discussion of issues. They also had access to a large population of discussion participants as friends of friends often interacted with one another via newsfeed discussions. As such, people were exposed to other citizens with diverse viewpoints and perspectives, but interacted in a meaningful way. For example, when friends were perceived to be skewing information, our informants felt they could engage and correct them, without offending them. As described by one informant (p17):

"I know they're my friends, but oftentimes we skew facts even if by accident. So if somebody makes a statement, if they're on Facebook, a close friend or an acquaintance, I like to check it. If they're my friends I can say I think that's wrong without upsetting them. They're close to me and don't get offended… it's not like a blog or Tumblr, where people can attack what you say anonymously. There's no anonymity on Facebook, there's an accountability for your words and actions..."

Informants attempted to use other media like Twitter or blogs in conjunction with Facebook but found them to be lacking. Firstly, they felt that Facebook, unlike Twitter, provided interactional context and was more useful as a discussion tool as you could see how a conversation had unfolded by perusing visible comment streams. Secondly, they felt that the Twitter character limit was restrictive and did not facilitate discussion. Lastly, they felt that the anonymity afforded by other media networks like blogs enabled negative interaction like flaming.

However, for others (twelve informants), the presence of family and friends on Facebook led them to use other media. They felt people on Facebook were, as one informant described, "way too emotional." Our informants wanted to avoid upsetting friends and family members, avoid arguments, and ultimately not ruin their relationships. Even when people felt like they were being reasonable in how they approached a discussion on Facebook, their friends and family would still have a negative emotional response. As described by one informant (p5):

"On Facebook I try not to do too much civil discussion and the only reason why I don't do it is because I know way too many people and they get too emotional and take things way too personally…. I've seen really bad stuff happen…"

In order to engage with others, informants began using one or more media to engage in political discussions. Firstly, they described the informality of other networks as improving the overall discursive experience. For example, when people were emotional or engaging in flaming behavior through Twitter, our informants did not take offense, as they did not know many of the other discussion participants personally. They could simply continue searching for or targeting participants who wished to discuss issues rationally. Secondly, four informants adopted other media to interact anonymously. Lastly, informants described how the integration of opinion with facts via the linking to other resources, e.g. news sites and websites, helped in enabling reasoned discussion.

One informant (p21), who was employed at a cannery, described the desire to "connect with people who could change [his] mind." After several "bad experiences" discussing politics through Facebook, he began using a combination of Twitter, Google+, and Reddit. Although he did not knowingly construct informal networks in each respective tool, during our discussion (in checking his networks via his mobile phone) he determined that his networks were mostly informal, but that they had formed that way organically. He used these tools to interact with different audiences who held diverse perspectives, as he wished to find "intelligent people with who [he] could have intelligent discussions."

Another informant (p20), a social worker, found that his Facebook friends were too easily offended when he disagreed with them, and believed the Twitter character limit to be too restrictive. Using Google+, however, he constructed an informal network through which he could engage in meaningful political discussions:

"Google+ is where I take a lot of my debates… and the reason I do that is because I'm not as emotionally attached to a lot of people on that circuit. If they feel offended they can always uncircle me and I don't care. Most of those people end up respecting me and my point of view. I do keep things on a professional level… if I'm disrespectful to someone it's just not good for real discussions...."

The diverse and rational discussions informants were having, in turn, led some people to alter their views on political issues and form what they considered to be more informed perspectives. They were not simply making pre-conceived judgments about other people's political views; rather, they were interested in better understanding why people "held certain perspectives by putting [themselves] in other people's shoes."

As explained by one informant (p13) who changed his views on the RAIL project—a light-rail system that is being

constructed on the island of Oahu. During the most recent Mayoral election in 2012, the RAIL project was the most prevalent issue driving political discourse amongst Oahu's residents:

"On Facebook people are free to post and express their likes and dislikes on certain issues and they're all coming from different places and affected in different ways. So many people… are approaching certain issues and I try to understand why certain issues affect them. This can often lead me to re-think my perspectives… for example, with RAIL, I have some friends who were completely against it. I couldn't understand that perspective, but after talking to my friends on Facebook, I was able to really get a feel for why they didn't want it to happen and how it would impact their lives… and frankly, now I agree with them."

Another informant (p9), after feeling limited in her ability to interact with others through Facebook, Twitter, and online news sites, found a neutral blogging site through which she interacted in reasoned discussions that altered her perspectives on political issues. She described how the rational discussions she held with others helped her understand how certain issues like "having the right to choose" actually impacted others and helped her change her perspectives accordingly:

"Yes, because when people disagree on the blog I frequent, as they often do, they tend to argue in a respectful fashion. Not by calling names. And, they tend to argue by bringing up facts… to make their points. It's a reasoned discussion, I like reasoned discussions. And so a… a political discussion online can sometimes change my views. I can see what I thought about such and such is wrong…."

Contrary to the polarization perspective, our informants were actively seeking discussants with diverse perspectives through which they could better establish common ground and understand opposing viewpoints. The conversations people were having even led some people to change their views.

DISCUSSION

We used Habermas' theory of the public sphere, along with Dahlgren's [11] subsequent elaborations, to provide an analytical frame through which we could interpret our empirical data. We examined the political interactions that emerge across diverse social media in both political and non-political spheres. We used qualitative bottom-up methods to understand how users were appropriating multiple social media to engage in political deliberation.

We found that the ways in which people used social media was an interaction between the characteristics and goals of the user and the affordances of the social media tools. The way in which each respective individual appropriated and/or perceived a tool mediated their interactions in the public sphere. Our data suggests that these politically involved and technology savvy people have learned to shape various online social tools to meet their information

gathering, posting and participation needs. The affordances of the social media at hand resulted in uniquely structured public spheres with different qualities. We found that the audiences present within a social network could dictate a user's ability to consume and disseminate information, and engage in discussions—and this caused multi-mediation in the context of political deliberation. People made fluid technology choices based on the audiences within their networks, being concerned with how they were perceived by different audiences, and with how their audiences were influenced by their online political activities.

We return to Papacharissi's [29] hypothesis about the public sphere in the age of social media, where she re-conceptualizes the public sphere as being more akin to "private spheres"—or online spaces that provide people with the autonomy that is most associated with physical private spaces, but with the potential audience of a public act. Our results show that the audience plays an instrumental role in dictating how people interact in the public sphere.

There exists a duality between the private and the public—one where agency can be structured by the public and the public can be structured by the individual. For example, people's ability to disseminate and access diverse information can be dictated by their perceptions of the audience, where the audience is relative to the medium. People can also aim to alter public opinion through the dissemination of information and opinions, or through discussion, thus acting as change agents. However, as we found in our study, the public quality of the private sphere was instrumental in shaping people's interactions. The perceived audience and the potential negative ramifications of their interactions led to multi-mediation, and the various media all varied in relation to how "private" or "public" they were.

Facebook, for example, has at least two distinct types of spaces with differing qualities that can be accessed by any one individual. Firstly, there is the unique private sphere that is constructed by each individual user, composed of an individual's (usually) real-world friend network. When members of the network post political links and opinions, or initiate political discussions, these become points of interaction where people can, in turn, engage others if they so choose. However, with Facebook, much of the discussion may or may not be political. This makes the use of Facebook for political deliberation challenging since users must scroll through their entire newsfeed to seek out political information and discussions. Furthermore, the degree to which differing views are exchanged is also dependent on the network, as the more heterogeneous an individual's network the more likely diverse political exchanges will result. Secondly, there are the group-based public spheres that are open to the public, where people can interact and exchange information, as well as discuss political issues. These public spheres have been the major

foci of recent studies of the deliberation that is taking place on Facebook. The unique public spheres and group-based public spheres are connected (posts to groups are usually seen in individual's news feeds), but the behavior encouraged in both situations is potentially very different.

Twitter and Google+ are more "public" than Facebook since people can follow any number of users with public profiles in a non-reciprocal relationship. Interview informants, in understanding the differences between Facebook and more impersonal networks like Twitter, purposefully constructed their networks to obtain political information and be able to engage in meaningful discussions with others. The adoption and use of other media served as a way in which people could work around the challenges of using Facebook as a tool for political deliberation. It also demonstrated the different levels of malleability in these social media tools. Whereas people were unable to effectively shape their Facebook networks for deliberative purposes because their networks were personal their newsfeeds were multidimensional, they were able to mold Twitter and Google+ into a political information acquisition and discussion tool.

Towards Depolarization
Many studies, in looking at the deliberative activities that emerge online, have suggested that the Internet is leading towards *polarization* [e.g. 40]. In contrast, building on previous work [e.g. 27], through our examination of the full spectrum of public spheres (both political and non-political) available through multiple media, we found that people's broader online interactions were *depolarized* in nature.

Papacharissi [29] suggests that the combination of networked activities provides the basis of a participatory culture that may have democratizing consequences. We found that people were participating in these private/public spaces. Contrary to the polarization perspective, our informants were purposefully seeking diverse information and perspectives, disseminating diverse information and perspectives, and engaging with diverse audiences. They accomplished this through the appropriation of multiple media. Some of our informants even reported altering their own political views as a result of the exposure to diverse perspectives and their ability to engage in rational conversations with people holding alternative viewpoints.

Implications for Research
Most scholarly work in this space has focused on a single medium. This may explain why many public sphere scholars share the view that the Internet serves as a polarized and polarizing "echo chamber" in which people only seek political information that is aligned with their beliefs, or discuss political issues and candidates with citizens who are also in support of those issues and candidates [e.g. 2, 16, 40, 43]. In our study, we looked at people's interactions across social media tools and found that people were actively seeking diversity.

In building on Papacharissi's [29] work, we found that people's interactions across multiple public spheres did have a democratizing value. We believe it is important that researchers continue to investigate how individuals appropriate multiple media and interact with multiple audiences across social media.

Implications for Design
Our results clearly demonstrated that our informants were actively seeking an environment through which they could accomplish their personal deliberation goals. Our informants were able to assemble a suitable deliberation environment to accomplish their own personal goals by combining multiple tools with varying affordances. However, this may be beyond the average user's capabilities. Based on our findings, we now elaborate on critical features for the design of new political public spheres.

The ability to view, understand, and select the audience: Our informants' experiences with social media were relative to the tool and their perceptions of the audience present within any given medium. Deliberative environments must provide users with the ability to understand their audience, as well as to select the audience they wish to target, much like how Google+ provides its users with the ability to place their connections into self-determined circles.

The ability to filter information: Our informants described a process whereby they constructed robust information environments using Twitter and Google+. This was counter to the unstructured way in which Facebook displays information to its users. A new deliberation system must afford its users the ability to filter information based on a variety of factors like ideology and sentiment, both for viewing and disseminating information.

The ability to aggregate: Our informants were actively seeking information and opinions from a variety of sources in both public and private contexts. Future deliberation systems must allow users to aggregate and filter whatever they wish, such as information, sources and contacts.

The ability to judge the impact of participation: Our informants were disseminating information with the intention of informing others in the various social media tools at their disposal. They were also engaging in discussions with diverse audiences. These participants cared very much about the impact of their interactions, however, they were unable to easily assess the impact of these interactions. Future tools must allow users to judge the impact of their participation, perhaps providing information, such as who read what a user posted, how many people cared, and what type of impact the activities had.

The ability to adjust identity: Some of our informants expressed how they experienced limitations in their ability to participate through social media as a result of identity

management. Future tools should allow users to adjust their identity from being anonymous to completely known, as both served varying purposes in people's online interactions.

Fusion of features: The features above would be best served in an integrated environment which was easy to navigate and understand and in which actions taken in one area (examining impact, for example) had influences in other areas (presentation of self, for example). Hacking multiple tools together, while allowing users to take advantage of multiple affordances, has the limitations of not coordinating actions and states in one tool to actions and states in another.

Limitations

Nearly all of our informants were proactive social media users with some interest in politics. Thus, we cannot generalize our results to people who do not share these characteristics. However, interview informants came from diverse educational and professional backgrounds. They were also diverse with respect to age, gender and political orientation. In an attempt to limit the issues associated with our sampling methodology, we found informants through multiple seeds, which could help to diversify our sample. However, our goal was not to generalize to the entire population. We wished to investigate whether or not social media could be used to directly support political interactions in the public sphere and found that a range of social media was being used as a platform for deliberative democracy. By taking a more ethnographic approach, we provided an introspective view into how individuals interacted across the sprawling public sphere.

Concluding Remarks

Social Media are malleable and users of these technologies can shape them to suit their needs and interests. People are now discovering how to manipulate and integrate multiple social media platforms in order to create the information, dissemination, and discussion environments they desire. As time passes and people's understandings of these technologies evolve (along with the technologies themselves), an even greater number of people will have learned to mold social media to better suit their needs. Thus, it will become increasingly important for us, as a research community, to continue to study users of social media as closely as possible. In contrast to the echo chamber view of social media that is widely shared by public-sphere scholars [e.g. 40], our findings provide a counter-narrative—not only can social media support people's deliberative interactions, but people's interactions through diverse social media may also be depolarized.

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