

## Political engagement online

### Do the information rich get richer and the like-minded more similar?

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*A new area for research is the extent to which the internet contributes to one particular form of political engagement: political discussion among heterogeneous networks of citizens. While it may be that the information rich continue to get richer, it is far less clear that the politically similar continue to become more similar. This chapter thus discusses research on the extent to which internet use affects individual-level political engagement and examines the possible role of the internet in exposing people to politically dissimilar others. A sample analysis follows, which finds that online political discussion is significantly and positively associated with politically heterogeneous individual discussion networks. Finally, the discussion considers normative implications and future research concerning political landscapes with varying interactions between knowledge gaps and heterogeneous political discussion.*

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An established tenet of U.S. political culture is that the democratic process should be “firmly anchored in the judgments of the demos” (Dahl, 1989: 338). By this standard, there is reason to suspect that Americans are living in democratically troubled times—a period of history characterized by a persistently under-informed citizenry, substantial declines in traditional indicators of civic and political engagement (Althaus, 1999; Bartels, 1996; Converse, 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 2003), and reduced political self-efficacy (Brody, 1978; Miller and Shanks, 1996). While connections between the state of democracy and technology have always existed, advances in information and communication technology just prior to the onset of the new millennium have made these connections all the more salient.

In particular, the internet has instigated wide speculation about its potential to reinvigorate political community and democratic life (Harrison and Falvey, 2001). Internet enthusiasts have pointed to the possibility that the medium could lead to increased political engagement and to direct democracy, with an unprecedented potential to reach young, isolated, and minority citizens; to weakened boundaries between the public and private sphere; and to an increase in direct links to policy-makers (Etzioni, 1997; Norris, 2001b; Porter, 1997; Rheingold, 1993).

Other observers have been more skeptical, arguing that at the individual level, the internet is more likely to reinforce established patterns of political communication, widening the knowledge gap

and digital divide between elites and non-elites. They note that opportunity is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for political engagement, and that information abundance does not mean that all, or even most, individuals will take advantage of it in ways that advance their roles as citizens (Bimber, 2003; Norris, 2001b). In other words, the information rich will get richer while the information poor will remain relatively poorer. Indeed, the vast majority of empirical evidence suggests that internet use has stimulated relatively few, if any, participation effects at the individual level (Bimber, 2001, 2003; Bimber and Davis, 2003; Katz and Rice, 2002; Scheufele and Nisbit, 2002).

However, in recent years, researchers have become more circumspect, acknowledging that, as with older media, the effects of the internet on political engagement may be more subtle and indirect than previously assumed (e.g., Hardy and Scheufele, 2005; Howard, 2003: 216–19). Further, traditional indicators of political engagement (e.g., factual political knowledge, voting) are not the only normatively compelling issues presented by an increasingly connected citizenry.

One particularly compelling issue is the extent to which internet use promotes exposure to political disagreement and deliberation among citizens—a phenomenon long considered essential to a vibrant and pluralistic public sphere, producing a “high scale of mental activity” (Mill, 1859/1998), an “enlarged mentality” or more sophisticated opinions (Arendt, 1968), and prompting greater interpersonal deliberation and personal reflection (Habermas, 1989). Empirical research has furthermore demonstrated that it has several tangible benefits, such as increased accuracy about the distribution of public opinion (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995)—which is likely to promote a sense of legitimacy for democratic outcomes (Price, Cappella, and Nir, 2002)—increased political

learning (Price, Cappella, and Nir, 2002), and the ability to differentiate among ideologically distinct attitudes (Gastil *et al.*, forthcoming). Recent research has even indicated a stimulus effect on political participation when discussion among heterogeneous networks is combined with hard news media use (Scheufele *et al.*, 2003; Scheufele *et al.*, 2004).

Yet in spite of a good deal of theoretical speculation on this issue (e.g., Galston, 2003; Sunstein, 2001), the impact of the internet on exposure to political difference remains unclear. On one hand, the personal control provided by the internet creates the possibility that people will exercise an increasing tendency for selectivity in discussion partners, reinforcing their perceptions and attitudes. On the other hand, the internet may weaken traditional social, informational, and political boundaries, which could potentially lead to increased exposure to disagreement.

### **Do the information rich get richer? Hard news media use, political discussion, and political participation**

#### ***News media use***

In retrospect, the hope that the internet would stimulate mass political engagement at the individual level seems a bit historically naïve. With the exception of the newspaper, which for the first time allowed for the mass distribution of political information, historical advances in information technology have done little to advance political engagement (Bimber, 2003; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002). Yet from an intuitive perspective, the current information environment would seem to be the perfect antidote to the more informationally and geographically challenged mass media audience (Sey and Castells,

2004)—an environment that is able to transcend time, space, and possibly ideologies. Indeed, classic explanations of political behavior at the individual level, rooted in rational choice theory, would seem to point in this direction (Downs, 1957; Verba *et al.*, 1995). A rational choice involves a form of cost-benefit analysis, which may be applied to strategies involved in choices, to engage in political participation, information seeking, and the acquisition of political knowledge, or decisions to participate in political deliberation. If technological developments, such as the internet, reduce the cost of both providing and accessing information, provide more convenient and less demanding forums for political deliberation, and on many occasions reduce the cost of political participation to the click of a mouse, individuals with access to the internet, who might not otherwise find the time, will be more likely to participate.

Yet human beings are not always rational creatures—the internet is not somehow a utopia where psychological predispositions do not apply (Katz and Rice, 2002; Neuman, 1991). Any technology, and especially the internet, is shaped not only by its potentially rational uses, but also by the ways in which people actually use it. As it applies to news and other elite discourse, human psychology suggests that as the cost of information falls and as sources increase, the already information rich will get richer, while the information poor will remain relatively poorer (Bimber, 2003). This is the fundamental proposition of the knowledge gap hypothesis (Donohue *et al.*, 1975). The psychological basis of this proposition draws on schema theory and related research, arguing that individuals with more complex cognitive schema are better able to process and incorporate new information. The knowledge gap hypothesis is somewhat more sociological,

arguing that pre-existing educational, income, and other social resources allow some to not only gain access to, but also to internalize and apply, new knowledge faster and better.

Indeed, a long line of media-effects research reveals that mere exposure to news does not account for the influence of news content on individuals (McLeod and McDonald, 1985). Eveland and colleagues (Eveland, 2001, 2002; Eveland *et al.*, 2003), for example, found that attention, cognitive involvement, and news elaboration serve as important contributors to political learning. Attending to news involves the selection of a subset of information for processing, while elaboration involves a more intensive and integrative process of making cognitive associations between new information and information already held in memory. Thus, more knowledgeable individuals learn more from broadcast and print news and subsequently have more differentiated constructs and higher quality arguments in essays about policy issues (Rhee and Cappella, 1997). A media-uses and gratifications approach further supports the knowledge gap hypothesis. People with more knowledge about political and civic life should seek out more political information because they are able to process it with greater ease and find it more gratifying. For example, newspapers are more gratifying to more sophisticated and knowledgeable citizens to the extent that they facilitate purposive control (Chaffee and Kanihan, 1997).

In recent years, the internet has become an increasingly important news resource. By the end of 2005, nearly 50 million people in the U.S. obtained some of their news through the internet on an average day (Horrihan, 2006). Yet it appears that the information rich have been most able to harness the abundance of information provided online. In general, those people who were politically engaged before the

internet are the very same people who are politically engaged on the internet—those high in socioeconomic status, political efficacy, and political knowledge (Bimber, 2001, 2003; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002), have an interest in politics and are more likely to be skeptical of information (Bimber, 2003: 219; also see Shah *et al.*, 2005). Those engaged in political participation online tend to be disproportionately young, educated, and affluent (Cornfield and Rainie, 2006; Rainie *et al.*, 2005). The more people read about campaigns in newspapers or learn about them through news broadcasts, the more likely it is that they will also attend to such information online (Bimber and Davis, 2003).

### **Political discussion**

Yet news media and other elite discourse are not the only way to garner knowledge and form public opinion. Through political discussion, citizens may elevate their thinking, reveal private information, learn to justify their claims, and thereby achieve more sophisticated opinions (Fearon, 1998; Price and Cappella, 2002). Political discussion and news use may work in tandem, one solidifying the other. Tarde (1899/1989), for example, argued that newspaper reading triggers political discussion, political discussion influences public opinion, and opinion in turn stimulates political action (Katz, 1981; Kim *et al.*, 1999).

The trouble with political discussion, however, is that the processes involved tend to be biased toward those with extensive civic skills, including a good vocabulary, the ability to communicate in English, a sense of personal efficacy, the ability to write or speak well, and the cognitive wherewithal to draw on previously existing political knowledge. The most educated members of society disproportionately tend to have these skills (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Those people with

the most requisite political knowledge tend to be the most attentive during political deliberation and are therefore likely to get more out of it (Kwak *et al.*, 2005). Thus deliberation can just as easily become a lesson in unidirectional political persuasion and opinion reinforcement as it can become a mutual uplifting of minds.

The internet offers a novel forum for political deliberation, enabling anyone with internet access to communicate via chat rooms, website bulletin boards, e-mail, wikis, videos posts, or weblogs (or blogs). Nevertheless, engagement in online forums of deliberation is greater under conditions of high political motivation, high socioeconomic status, opportunity (Price *et al.*, 2002), and strong connections to local communities through political activities (McLeod *et al.*, 1999). In a field experiment using a nationally representative panel, Price *et al.* (2002) found that individuals who participated in scheduled online discussions conformed to a hierarchical model of participation—they were older, highly educated, predominantly white, more politically knowledgeable, more politically interested and active, and had higher levels of social trust. They also found that while political deliberation online significantly improved opinion quality, those participants who benefited the most were higher in social capital, more educated, and had higher incomes.

### **Political participation**

Political learning and the subsequent desire and means to participate are highly contingent upon the setting of political agendas and on the framing of political events and issues by elites (Bimber, 2003). Agenda-setting and framing research has demonstrated that the media influence which political issues are treated as important by focusing the public's attention on certain events and by framing those events in particular ways (McCombs *et al.*, 1997;

Wanta, 1997). They are able to serve this function by making certain news topics more salient than others, while putting a particular perspective or spin on these topics (Entman, 1991, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Iyengar, 1990; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). According to framing theory, the spin and the salience of particular news items are then transferred to (and through) the audience. Some observers have speculated that the ways in which news media tend to frame political topics, in particular though their emphasis on sensationalized political conflict as opposed to political consensus, may alienate certain segments of the citizenry and lead to a spiral of cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). By influencing the kinds of issues that citizens think about and the way that they think about them, the media may additionally influence whether or not people choose to participate politically and which activities they choose to participate in. Furthermore, those people with the least well-developed cognitive schema are the least likely to attend to information at all, but the most likely to be influenced by the ways that the news media and other elites frame the information (Bimber, 2003).

However, as Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) point out, the internet complicates and disperses the framing and agenda setting processes. During the "mass audience" era, the political agenda had been largely shaped by a mutual relationship between dominant political actors and mainstream news outlets—the gatekeepers. The current information environment has changed this two-way system into a "multiaxial" one for at least two central reasons. First, the multiplication of political news media and the blurring of the boundaries between entertainment and news have led to competition within the media for the role of the gatekeeper. Second, the internet with its attendant destruction of normal news cycles and rise

of news blogs and online newspapers has created novel opportunities for non-mainstream political actors to contribute to the setting and framing of the public agenda. No longer do two elite groups, the press and government institutions, hold virtually sole domain over the framing of news stories and the setting of agendas. Yet all of this simply suggests a more chaotic information environment for individuals to make sense of, not the end of framing and agenda-setting itself.

Howard (2003, 2005, 2006) argues that beyond the typical effects at the individual political participation level, and at the campaign media and funding level, an entirely new and generally unknown influence has emerged—that of hypermedia political campaigns, run by non-traditional entities using a wide range of technology and data. Digital technologies, databases, and networks have fostered the rise of hypermedia political campaign organizations, outside the control of major media and major political parties. From grass-roots activism to elite political campaigns, these organizations—often a small group of consultants and firms—collect a wide variety of information on personal demographics and consumption, polling and voting data, online and other media use. They use this information along with a wide array of techniques, such as very quick, targeted online polls, and data mining of combined and integrated databases, to shape what potential citizens are exposed to, aware of, and think about. As a result, Howard (2005: 153) argues, while democracy is becoming deeper—that is, a wider "diffusion of rich data about political actors, policy options, and the diversity of actors and opinion in the public sphere"—citizenship is thinning—that is, increased political expression with less substantive engagement, and less shared text in the public sphere.

Taken together, individual biases influencing news use and political discussion,

media agenda setting and framing effects, and new forms of media and political consulting, all suggest that while political knowledge is a consistent predictor of political participation, political learning and participation are highly contingent processes, both online and offline. For example, political discussion via e-mail has been found to be a positive predictor of political participation (Brundidge, 2006) and of civic participation (Shah *et al.*, 2005) while political discussion via chat rooms is a negative predictor of political participation (Brundidge, 2006). Others have found that, as with face-to-face deliberation, it is the interaction between media consumption and online political discussion that predicts political participation (Hardy and Scheufele, 2005).

Overall, research findings have been consistent with a psychological as opposed to a rational model of political behavior. While information is easier to come by and while political participation requires less effort than ever before, the new information resources provided by the internet are more likely to be used by people who are politically knowledgeable and high in socioeconomic status. At least for the time being, the information rich continue to get richer.

### **Do the like-minded become more similar? The contribution of the internet to the heterogeneity of political discussion networks**

While the information rich may indeed get richer, do the like-minded become more similar? Research on traditional face-to-face forums of political discussion suggests that exposure to political disagreement is not well predicted by traditional individual-level antecedents of political engagement, including political knowledge and socioeconomic status. One

theoretical explanation is that tendencies toward selective exposure to politically similar individuals may be especially strong for those who consider politics central to their lives and identity (i.e., partisans, politically knowledgeable people). Certain political attitudes, on the other hand, such as low partisanship, ideological liberalism, as well as structural-level factors, such as the forum of discussion (e.g., the workplace), seem to be better overall predictors (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague, 2004; Mutz, 2006). Exposure to disagreement online then should not then conform to the knowledge-gap or rich-get-richer hypothesis.

Yet the contribution of online forums of discussion (e.g., chat rooms and e-mail) in facilitating the creation of heterogeneous political discussion networks has been relatively neglected by research. Those studies that do examine the role of the internet tend to examine the online world as essentially separate from the offline world (e.g., Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2007). This research helps to specify the mechanisms by which people are exposed to political disagreement online, which is an essential piece of the puzzle, but does not suggest the extent to which these mechanisms contribute to the collective heterogeneity of people's political discussion networks. Because online political discussion has either been overlooked or studied in isolation from people's whole experience of the public sphere, a number of fundamental theoretical arguments about the impact of the internet are unresolved. Perhaps the most important of these is whether internet use is adding to the overall diversity of people's entire political discussion networks, having no impact, or somehow even leading to increased selective exposure and political fragmentation. Other internet related studies employ experimentally controlled settings (e.g., Price *et al.*, 2002) or tend to focus on the heterogeneity of news and

information rather than heterogeneity of interpersonal discussion (e.g., Bimber and Davis, 2003; Garrett, 2005; Tewksbury and Althaus, 2000).

Broadly speaking, scholars have suggested two seemingly contradictory mechanisms that could potentially influence online exposure to political disagreement: selective exposure, which leads to narrowed domains of political discourse, and weakening social boundaries, which broaden opportunity for exposure to political disagreement.

### **Selective exposure**

There are several processes by which use of new media may lead to narrowed domains of political discourse. In one way or another, most of these processes constitute variations on a general claim that as people gain increasing control over communication and the flow of information, they will exercise an increasing tendency for selectivity in discussion partners and exposure to information. This view invokes the longstanding theory of selective exposure from the political communication literature (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Frey, 1986; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995; Katz, 1981) and simply maps it onto the internet, hypothesizing an amplification in selectivity due to the increased control derived from the purposive way that the internet is used.

Bimber and Davis (2003), for example, rank-order various media environments as to their tendency to promote selectivity on the basis of the volume of information they provide, the diversity of viewpoints, and the extent of control given to the individual. They conclude that when compared with television news, newspapers, and talk shows, the internet actually offers the conditions most conducive to selective exposure. Another factor leading to increased selectivity are structural aspects of the internet that require

individuals to actively search for and click on links to information sources, which could lead to them to exclusively expose themselves to information they have been searching for or information that seems particularly personally relevant.

This line of thought is supported by some recent research. Mutz and Martin (2001) found that as individuals are given increasing control over the selection of news media sources, they become more likely to expose themselves to information more compatible with their own viewpoints. Bimber and Davis (2003) report that audiences for campaign websites during the 2000 U.S. presidential election were likely to consist of knowledgeable, interested, and partisan supporters of the candidate, as opposed to non-supporters of the candidate. Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) contrast the effects of the print edition of the *New York Times* with the effects of the online edition. Rather than attending to the most prominent or important news stories, the users of the online edition were more likely to attend to personally relevant news. Two studies of political blogs furthermore support the selective exposure/homogeneity of political discussion networks thesis. Tremayne *et al.* (2006) found that the network of links among a small number of blogs reporting on the Iraq war consisted of two distinct clusters—liberal and conservative blogs—although there were some central blogs linking the two clusters. Adamic and Glance (2005) provide quite similar results from studying relations among the posts of 40 A-list blogs over the period of two months preceding the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Liberal blogs linked primarily to other liberal blogs, and conservative blogs linked primarily to other conservative blogs (more frequently and more densely than among liberal blogs), with only a few cross-listings.

The macro-level consequences of such selectivity and subsequent “personalized

realities" fostered through the internet may be substantial (Bennett, 1998: 741). These personalized realities represent a dynamic and pervasive social adjunct to Putnam's (2000) concern with the ill effects of bonding (brings homogeneous people together) as opposed to bridging (brings heterogeneous people together) social capital (see Norris, 2004 for an application to online communities). The most prominent advocate of this position is Sunstein (2001), who writes that the internet will foster enclave communication among politically homogenous citizens, yielding polarization of opinions, widening political divides between extreme sides on public issues, and encouraging cyber-cascades of unsubstantiated and sometimes false information.

Yet whatever its online implications, the theory of selective exposure has itself received only mixed support. Rooted in cognitive dissonance theories, selective exposure suggests that when individuals are exposed to information that conflicts with their political belief system, they become cognitively uncomfortable, which causes them to look for conforming messages and avoid conflicting messages (e.g., Festinger, 1957). However, despite some evidence that people seek supportive messages, research has generally been unable to consistently demonstrate that people avoid contradictory messages (Festinger, 1957; Rhine, 1967; Sears and Freedman, 1967; see also Chaffee *et al.*, 2001). A further amendment to the original theory of selective exposure suggests that selectivity is not a common activity among all or most individuals. Rather, it is the most politically sophisticated individuals who are most likely to selectively attend to information, reinforcing previously existing beliefs and knowledge (e.g., Graber, 1984). Some observers have concluded that selective exposure is not nearly as pervasive as once suggested (e.g., Kinder, 2003). Zaller (1992: 139), for example,

suggests: "Most people ... are simply not so rigid in their information-seeking behavior that they will expose themselves only to ideas that they find congenial. To the extent selective exposure occurs at all, it appears to do so under special conditions that do not typically arise in situations of mass persuasion."

In line with amendments to the original theory of selective exposure, there is some evidence to suggest that despite the increased control provided by the internet, people are not using it to weed out certain partisan perspectives. Garrett (2005), for example, finds from a combination of survey research and laboratory experiments that the online environment facilitates people's seeking of viewpoints that reinforce existing positions, but does not comparably promote avoidance of challenging viewpoints. He argues that the internet is imperfect in its ability to weed out certain partisan perspectives. Typing in the phrase pro-choice as a search term, for example, yields results both for and against this position. Rainie *et al.* (2005) furthermore find that 36 percent of internet users report encountering campaign news and information on the internet not as the result of a directed search but by accident, while online for an altogether different purpose.

### ***Weakened social boundaries***

Further facilitating potential exposure to political disagreement and possibly countering the influence of online selective exposure is the potential of internet use to weaken social, political, and ideological boundaries through interactive communication technologies, such as website bulletin boards, chat rooms, e-mail, and feedback loops to news organizations and politicians (Price and Cappella, 2002; Shah *et al.*, 2005). New media may reduce or overcome the costs and environmental or structural constraints traditionally associated

with political discussion and other forms of civic engagement by blurring and making more porous the boundaries between the private and the public sphere, and between different ideological groups.

First, perhaps most obviously, geographic borders that mark and support the homogeneity of a particular population do not bind the internet. Whether or not people take advantage of it, there is ample opportunity for people to expose themselves to political difference that they might not otherwise encounter offline within their usual physical boundaries. People may be exposed to different political perspectives online simply by chance (Garrett, 2005). This possibility is well illustrated by Wojcieszak and Mutz (2007), who find that exposure to political disagreement is most likely to take place in non-political, as opposed to explicitly political, chat rooms, suggesting that it happens somewhat unexpectedly, while people are meeting to discuss topics other than politics. Second, the internet allows people to develop broader and lower density networks or weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) that potentially allow for increased exposure to novel information and political disagreement. Boase and colleagues, for example, found that the internet may actually be transforming the shape of communities from small tightly knit associations to far-reaching social networks (Boase *et al.*, 2006: 55). Rather than relying on one or two communities for socializing, help, and information, internet users are tending to use a variety of appropriate people and web resources.

Clearly, politically heterogeneous communities can and do exist online (e.g., Barber, Mattson, and Peterson, 1997; Dahl, 1989; Downing, 1989; London, 1993). Moreover, some online political discussants actually appreciate and enjoy engagement in heterogeneous spaces of deliberation (Stromer-Galley, 2002). In 2002, about a quarter of the U.S. adult population visited

websites that provided information about specific issues or policies that interested them; while 8 percent said they visited sites that share their point of view, 13 percent said they visited websites that have different views (Howard, 2005: 159).

Overall then, tendencies toward selective exposure may constrain people's exposure to political disagreement online. While an overwhelming amount of political diversity may exist online, people may not be overly enthusiastic about exposing themselves to it. Conversely, limits on selective exposure processes and weakened social boundaries seem to facilitate inadvertent, if not intended, exposure to political disagreement online, potentially leading to an overall increase in the heterogeneity of people's political discussion networks.

### **Analysis of individual-level influences on heterogeneous political discussion**

As a preliminary exploration of the relationship of internet use and exposure to political difference, this section provides just an example, overall summary test of several of the influences discussed above, using a national survey sample.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Measures**

Table 11.1 provides the descriptive statistics and operationalizations of the items and scales appearing in the final regression model—the explanatory variables of age, offline political discussion, online political discussion, ideological polarity, ideology, political knowledge, and the dependent variable of politically heterogeneous discussion.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Results**

In order to provide context to the particular role of the internet, a combination of

sociodemographic controls, traditional predictors of exposure to disagreement, and discussion variables were entered into a hierarchical multiple regression analysis (first block: education, race, age, sex, discussion at work, discussion with family, social ideology, political knowledge, and ideological polarity; second block: online discussion).

As Table 11.2 shows, age, political knowledge, ideological polarity, social ideology, discussion at work, discussion with family, and importantly, online discussion, were significant influences on heterogeneous political discussion, explaining 34 percent of the variance. Concerning heterogeneous political discussion, the information rich, at least in terms of how

they are usually conceptualized, are not necessarily getting richer. Consistent with the results of prior research, political discussion network heterogeneity was not significantly predicted by socioeconomic status, an important predictor of most forms of political engagement. Interestingly, age was an inverse predictor, suggesting that this particular form of engagement is actually more common among younger individuals. In contrast with prior findings, political knowledge was a very small, yet significant positive predictor (however, previous research examined the ratio of like-minded to non-like-minded voices, whereas this analysis examined overall political discussion network heterogeneity).

**Table 11.1** Descriptive statistics for the variables of a model explaining political discussion network heterogeneity

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Frequency of political discussion at work	3.6	2.9
Frequency of political discussion with family	5.8	3.0
Frequency of online discussion (mean of two items)	1.3	1.6
Age	50.1	17.2
Social ideology	4.0	1.7
Ideological polarity	1.3	1.0
Political knowledge ( $\alpha = .89$ , sum of four items)	2.6	1.2
Heterogeneous political discussion (mean of four items)	2.5	1.6
Unweighted N		440

Source: Author's calculations based on data from Scheufele (2003).

**Table 11.2** Hierarchical multiple regression explaining political discussion network heterogeneity

<i>Predictor variable</i>	<i>B coefficient</i>
Age	-0.11**
Ideological polarity	-0.21***
Social ideology (conservatism)	-0.14***
Political knowledge	0.09*
Political discussion at work	0.31***
Political discussion with family	0.27***
Political discussion online	0.10*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.34
Unweighted N	440

Source: Author's calculations based on data from Scheufele (2003).

Notes:

\* =  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ ; online discussion was entered as a separate, second block.

While traditional forums of political discussion (i.e., at work and with family) emerged as the most powerful predictors of network heterogeneity, the internet does appear to play an important role in exposing people to political diversity. In particular, online discussion may facilitate discussion with politically dissimilar individuals. In line with prior research findings, social ideology (conservatism) and ideological polarity were furthermore inversely related to heterogeneous political discussion.

## Conclusion

For the most part, research findings on the internet and political participation have conformed to the rich get richer hypothesis. New information resources provided by the internet are more likely to be used by people high with socioeconomic status and political knowledge—those individuals who are less subject to the framing and agenda setting functions of the media and who are already likely to participate politically. These tendencies help to explain why the internet has exerted little effect on individual level political participation—this, in spite of the vast array of democratic opportunities that the internet provides (Bimber, 2003). The results from the sample analysis do, however, suggest that unlike many traditional predictors of political engagement, online discussion does contribute slightly to the heterogeneity of political discussion networks.

One general potential implication of increased or decreased knowledge gaps, and increased or decreased heterogeneity of political discussion, are four different kinds of political environments. An environment where political knowledge gaps are decreasing, and exposure to political disagreement is increasing, may be the sought-after political environment of deliberative democracy. However, decreasing

knowledge gaps in environments where exposure to disagreement decreases may result in polarized enclaves, each knowledgeable and politically active but at best unaware and at worst hostile to any difference. When political knowledge gaps increase but exposure to disagreement decreases, ideological domination may arise, whereby minority and less educated groups are not even aware of alternative perspectives. Finally, when political knowledge gaps continue to increase, but exposure to disagreement also increases, elite demagoguery may arise, whereby knowledgeable political elites can manipulate meanings and salience of alternative perspectives.

This final possibility of elite demagoguery receives the most support from the research findings and analyses presented in this chapter. As reflected in the observations of Bennett and Manheim (2001), this possibility suggests that as the boundaries between the public and the private sphere become increasingly porous, and as more and more political mobilists transcend them, citizens may become exposed to more numerous and more varied competitive bids for their attention. In such an environment, the formation of coherent and stable public opinion is likely a greater challenge, as opposed to a lesser one. Moreover, the current mobilization tactics used by the majority of elites exacerbate this challenge—tactics that seem to suppress the identities and motives of mobilizers, as well as the complete implications of their objectives, as a means to achieving instrumental political goals (Howard, 2006). Howard *et al.* (2005: 61) further argue that knowledge gaps make it very difficult for the lower educated and information poor to assess online claims and information during campaigns, leading to increased manipulation by political messages.

According to Dahl (1989: 338), if democracy is to move beyond a state of capture

by policy elites, or quasi-guardianship, and become more “firmly anchored in the judgments of the demos,” there needs to be a free flow of information in the policy process. To do this, Dahl contends that independent reliable knowledge must be transmitted to citizens in clear and transparent ways that facilitate inclusive deliberation on policy issues.

Future research should continue to explore how the internet and related new forms of discourse and sources of information, such as blogging, affect political engagement, especially political discussion among heterogeneous networks of citizens. Future research should also consider the differential likelihood and strength of each of the four political environments associated with the combinations of knowledge gaps and exposure to political disagreement.

### Guide to further reading

Much has been written about the multi-layered potential of advances in information and communication technology to improve, reinforce, or perhaps exacerbate the supposed state of society and the public sphere—there are a few texts that stand out as particularly seminal. A good starting point, for a broad look at the social consequences of internet use, such as its impact on community and the digital divide, is Katz and Rice (2002). For books relating specifically to the impact of the internet and related information technology on political and civic engagement, the authors recommend Neumann (1991) and Bimber (2003), both of which theoretically and historically situate these processes; Bimber and Davis (2003) is also relevant here, which looks at the impact of the internet on political campaigns. Iyengar (1990), Putnam (2000) and Zaller (1992), are suggested for broader discussions about the civic and political

consequences of media use. In terms of the specific issue of political discussion network heterogeneity, Mill (1859) and Habermas (1989) are required reading for normative perspectives, whereas Mutz (2006) and Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague (2004) take more empirical approaches, investigating the particular mechanisms that govern exposure to political disagreement. Finally, for a more thorough discussion of the macro-level consequences of selectivity, Sunstein (2001) is an essential source. Prior to examining the impact of information and communication technology on civic engagement, however, it seems essential to understand just what civic engagement is, how it might be conceptualized, the processes governing it, and why it might be desirable. Toward this end, Verba *et al.* (1995) specify the particular variables and mechanisms involved with different types of civic engagement, and Dahl (1989) provides a contemporary interpretation of democratic theory, which includes a defense of the normative value of political engagement.

### Notes

- 1 The Cornell University Survey Research Institute collected national level survey data used in this analysis in October and November of 2003, using CATI methods (N = 781). Dietram A. Scheufele was the principal investigator for the original study and generously shared the data. The response rate was 55 percent based upon AAPOR definitions. The survey was based on a carefully constructed probability sample that reduces sampling errors. The analyses use these data and some of the scales created by Dr. Scheufele, and other scales based on the current authors' conceptualizations and analyses. For the current chapter, only internet users were included in the analyses (N = 440).
- 2 Offline political discussion was assessed through the use of two separate items measuring the frequency of political discussion at work and with family (from 0 = never to 1

= very rarely, up to 10 = all the time). Online political discussion was assessed by computing the mean of two separate ten-point items that asked about frequency of political discussion via chat rooms, and e-mail. Social ideology was measured with a seven-point scale, with 1 being "very liberal" and 7 being "very conservative." The measure for ideological polarity also used this item. The farther along the scale in either direction indicated higher polarity. Factual political knowledge was an additive index of four items tapping correct identification of public figures and knowledge of current events (wrong answers were coded as 0, correct answers were coded as 1)—correctly naming the Vice President, describing the role of the Supreme Court, identifying how many votes are necessary to override a presidential veto, and naming the majority party. Heterogeneous political discussion was computed based on a ten-point scale, assessing how frequently respondents discuss politics with (1) people with extreme right views, (2) people with extreme left views, (3) people who are Democrats, and (4) people who are Republicans. Collectively these items create a total discussion heterogeneity scale, with higher scores on this scale indicating greater heterogeneity in political discussion

partners in terms of ideology and political party identification. Prior to the creation of this scale, however, some changes were made to the original items. Ideology and political party preference were recoded, with discussion with partners of the same ideological preferences recoded as 0. Ideological heterogeneity was assessed using respondents' self-placement on two seven-point ideological scales (economic and social) ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative." Likewise, political heterogeneity was evaluated through the use of an item assessing political party membership that asked respondents if they were registered Democrats, Republicans, or Independent/Other Party. Democrats who discussed politics with other Democrats were coded "0" for that discussion item, as were Republicans who discussed political issues or candidates with other Republicans. The ideological and political (party) items were then totaled into a combined index of overall heterogeneity of political discussion, based on the respondents' standardized differences between their own characteristics and those of their discussion partners. The following variables were not significant influences in preliminary analyses so are not described here: race, sex, education, income.

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# Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics

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