Article

Engaging Young People: Deliberative Preferences in Discussions About News and Politics

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Abstract

The Internet affords users a unique and low-cost way to engage with news, politics, and one another. Although young people are the most likely age cohort to go online, it is questionable whether young people take advantage of the Internet as a deliberative space. We examine the way college students perceive the online world as a venue for political discussion by analyzing responses from six focus groups conducted with college students across the United States. Using deliberative theory as a guide, we examine focus group participants' thoughts about political discussion both online and offline. Our findings indicate that young people's preferences for online discussions about politics and the news consistently link to the ideals of deliberation. Young people prefer engaging with others who are knowledgeable and remain flexible and calm during discussions. Goals for engaging in conversations about politics primarily revolved around sharing information and opinions. Participants preferred civil discourse that focuses on commonalities rather than differences between people. This study provides greater insight into how the rising generation currently engages with politics and the news and reasons why many people hesitate to participate in online discussions about public affairs.

Keywords

civility, deliberation, engagement, focus group, online news, political discourse

Introduction

Cory Haik, executive producer and senior editor for digital news at *The Washington Post*, described 2015 as "The year news organizations will rightly put a premium on their most engaged users." What does user engagement mean for newsrooms and what does it mean for civic discourse? Qualitatively, engagement is inherently social and happens through people interacting with the news and one another. Engaging audiences through social media has emerged as central to the success of news sites, and user interaction and discussion is at the heart of engagement.

Today, much civic discourse takes place through social media—what danah boyd (2015) described as "the new paradigm for connecting to information, people, and ideas" (p. 2). Social media in the form of online forums, blogs, news site comment sections, and social networking sites are among the outlets through which the public can engage with the news and participate in discussions about public affairs. Not every generation is easy to engage. Millennials (people born between early 1980s and late 1990s), for example, tend to be less interested in politics and follow the

news less closely than older generations (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015). While this disinterest may be troubling, some researchers have found that young peoples' ideas about political engagement differ from their predecessors. Millennials have shifted "away from dutiful norms to personalised, self-actualising norms with a preference for online, discursive forms of political engagement" (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). With newsrooms turning their attention online, and metrics of engagement tightly connected to discussion, this could be seen as a cause for celebration by news organizations. Young people's preference for online and discursive engagement may present an opportunity for news organizations to create and hold new

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audiences while simultaneously breathing civic life into a disinterested generation. So, what is getting in the way?

With this research, we turn to college students to explore their attitudes and experiences with political discussion and online interaction, and identify the factors which impede upon their engagement. The majority of today's college students are Millennials and their attitudes, while not representative of the entire generation, inform our understanding of political discussion engagement among young people. In this article, we investigate how college students view political discourse, and why they engage with, and avoid, online discussions surrounding politics, news, and public affairs. We begin by reviewing literature about political discussion, young people, and online interactions. Next, we describe the results from six focus groups from across the United States conducted with the goal of better understanding how and why young people currently use online spaces to access and interact with politics, news, and one another, and identify their preferences for political involvement and discussion. By using a deliberative framework to examine preferences and aversions to discussing politics, we offer a clearer picture of what attracts and repels young people from engaging in discussions about news and public affairs, particularly in online spaces. We ask focus group participants about their interactions around *politics, news*, and *public affairs*. We do not use these terms interchangeably, but rather to stimulate ideas about discussing current events (news), political actions and actors (politics), and social and political issues of public interest (public affairs), however, our study participants understand them. These findings have the potential to inform audience engagement efforts by news organizations, journalists, and others focused on political and civic engagement.

Political Discussion and Young Adults

Beyond indicating a news site's success, people exchanging their thoughts about politics and public affairs has long been considered central to the health of democracy (Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1939/1988). Engaging in political discussions helps people gain knowledge (Eveland & Thomson, 2006), teach or spread information to others (Brosius & Weimann, 1996; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), leads people to more considered opinions (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000), and can be just as important for their understanding of the news as news exposure itself (Robinson & Levy, 1986). Political discussion also informs people about ways to participate (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999) and can even influence their vote choices (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Discussing politics and current affairs, and the inherent disagreements that accompany this exchange, are a cornerstone of American democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996).

Scholars are not in complete agreement about the quality and influence of political discussion. Informal political talk is considered by many to be the basic method for learning about civic and political affairs and understanding other points of view, what Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) refer to as the very "soul of democracy" (p. 362). Schudson (1997) on the other hand argued that only talk which is deliberative and solution-centered should deserve such praise. Some researchers have found that more frequent discussions of politics were positively related to a citizenry that is more participative in terms of contacting candidates, attending meetings, and voting (Eveland & Hively, 2009; McLeod et al., 1999; Wyatt et al., 2000). Conversely, Mutz (2006) found that those who came into contact with ideas that differed from their own were less likely to participate. Finally, research suggests that the content of political conversations is likely not completely candid. Eliasoph (1998) suggested that even the most involved citizens sometimes fall silent on political issues, restrained by the social desirability of politeness. While there is not a consensus among researchers about the importance, outcomes, and content of political discussion, it is nonetheless a part of the deliberative system that deserves our attention.

Young adults present somewhat of a conundrum because they are the most likely cohort to be online, but the least likely to be engaged politically (Lupia & Philpot, 2005). Although young adults are notoriously uninterested in politics and the news, lack political knowledge, and have lower rates of political participation than their older counterparts (Delli Carpini, 2000), the trend of Millennials engaging in political activity online has been increasing in recent years (Smith, 2013). While research shows that young people often use the Internet in widely different ways (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008), a vast majority (71%) of young people today cite the Internet as a main news source and 67% of 18- to 24-year-olds have engaged in political activity on social networking sites (Smith, 2013). When researchers investigate what engagement means to young people, they often find something more personalized and discursive than institutional participation like voting or other forms of candidate or party support (Vromen et al., 2015). Discussion around politics and public affairs is essential to a deliberative system and inherent in participatory politics—interactive means by which people exert their opinions and influence (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014). Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs (2004) use the term *discursive participation* to describe the discourse among citizens that "provides the opportunity for individuals to develop and express their views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to understand and reach judgments about matters of public concern" (p. 319). New and social media provide young people (who are generally technology's earliest adopters) with an opportunity to engage in socially interactive participatory politics (Kahne et al., 2014). Online platforms afford users access to vast and diverse information, opinions, audiences, the ability to collaborate with and mobilize others, and the freedom to do these things apart from formal political structures and organizations (Kahne et al., 2014).

Researchers have analyzed how to get Millennials involved in the political sphere via new media. Iyengar and Jackman (2004) found that tailoring political information to youth by incorporating more interactive elements is successful at increasing their political interest and participation. They suggest that young people, whose preferred website attributes differ from their older counterparts, desire platforms that effectively and efficiently provide information relevant to the target demographic. Although not limited to engaging only young people, Zamith and Lewis (2014) offer innovative ideas for improving the design of online discussion spaces to better connect, moderate, and organize online commentary. Whereas previous work identifies design elements which can make spaces for political engagement more attractive to young people, this article identifies the attitudes and motivational factors which underlie their propensity to engage in or avoid such discourse.

Online Interactions, Civility, and Deliberative Ideals

Traditionally, political discourse has occurred primarily via face-to-face interactions, but today online interactions represent a substantial portion of political activity. Face-to-face political interactions, for most people, tend to take the form of discussions with family members, friends, and other close social connections (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002). Offline forms of political activity continue to be most common, even in an increasingly online world (Smith, 2013). Offline, or face-to-face, interactions are characterized by a closer physical and psychological proximity which grant interlocutors access to a variety of nonverbal and contextual cues that contribute to the dialogue. By contrast, online, or computer-mediated, interactions are typically characterized by physical and psychological distance that reduces the amount of richness, or nonverbal and contextual cues available, and can allow interlocutors to engage in discussion with relative anonymity (Dreyfus, 2009; Walther, 2012; Zhao, 2007). Differences in the channel or medium of communication can impact people's propensity to engage in—and the quality of—political discussions.

Research findings signal inherently social reasons for engaging in dialogue online; some desire online spaces where they can express their views while others seek community and connectedness through online engagement and these preferences are likely to impact the types of online spaces they inhabit. For example, those who contribute to comment sections tend to be more interested in expressing opinions and sharing information, while those who primarily read comment sections are more motivated by the social component of hearing and understanding others (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Mitchelstein, 2011). Other research has found that online forum users enjoy the exchange of ideas and different viewpoints that such a platform affords them, leading to a type of discourse which is not available elsewhere (Witschge, 2008). This article aims to build upon the previously described research by offering additional insight into discussion goals and describing the types of discourse that drive and halt online engagement.

While online spaces certainly offer potentially fruitful ways for the public to interact and become politically engaged, some lament that the nature of online spaces opens the door for incivility which may be a serious impediment to full and productive political discourse (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004). Papacharissi (2004) argued that civility involves enriching democracy and incivility involves "behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (p. 267). These two notions of civility—politeness and democratic enrichment—sometimes conflict since messages that enhance democracy (especially via a lively debate), could violate ideals of politeness. Papacharissi (2004) found that although mediated communication encouraged heated discussion, most messages were in fact civil. But when incivility does take place, incivility is distributed widely across commenters (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). Among other things, uncivil comments can encourage issue polarization and influence others' perceptions of the stories they surround (Anderson et al., 2014). Research on incivility in online discourse highlights the potential for commentary to influence peoples' discussion goals and behavior.

Closely tied to civility are the qualities inherent to deliberation, which Chambers (2003) defines as, "debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (p. 309). Although people may not always abide by the formal rules of deliberation, they do function as a goal by which discussants regulate their behavior. Gastil (2008) wrote that "When people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view" (p. 8). These definitions present what many would consider ideal instances of discourse among citizens: discussions that are governed by equality, fairness, and reasoned consensus.

The overarching qualities that run through many theorists' explanations of deliberation relate to the expectations of the participants, goals of the interaction, and the character of the discourse. First, for deliberation to occur, participants should be free, equal, and flexible (Chambers, 2003; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Kim et al., 1999). Second, the goal of conversation should be consensus or a solution (Barabas, 2004; Gastil, 2008; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Third and finally, the discourse should be public, rational, and well-reasoned (Chambers, 2003; Gastil, 2008; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Guided by these deliberative categories—expectations of the participants, goals of the interaction, and the character of the discourse—we address the following research question:

RQ1. How do young people describe their preferences and aversions for engaging in discussions about politics and public affairs, particularly in online spaces?

Method

Because our research goal was to better understand people's experiences and underlying motivations and preferences as they relate to engaging with news, politics, and one another, the focus groups method was chosen. A popular research method used in social science, focus group discussions gather small groups of participants to talk about specific topics. The focus group method is effective in generating discussion, revealing meanings that people construct and negotiate about a topic, and generating points of diversity and difference within and between groups (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Interviewers, or focus group moderators, asked each group about their experiences and preferences regarding political discussion and engagement with others, with an emphasis on online discussion. Since this particular research was focused on uncovering motivations and preferences for interactions, the researchers did not define politics or discussion for the focus group participants. Participants discussed interactions which ranged from commenting or posting on a social media website to in-person discussions with friends and family. Campus-centered activities, working with a local grassroots organization, local and national elections, political actors and representatives, and a host of other civic, political, and public affairs topics were discussed. Focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed.

Six focus groups were conducted at five different universities across the United States. Each of the focus group moderators guided the discussion by posing the following six questions: (1) In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, engage in political discussion? (2) What online platforms and websites do you currently use, if any, to get information about politics? (3) Describe a positive experience you have had with online political engagement? (4) Describe a negative experience you have had with online political engagement? (5) How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you? (6) Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. How would you design this space? What features would it have?

Each of the focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 min. Faculty members or administrators at each participating institution recruited participants by extending an invitation to both graduate and undergraduate students in their respective departments to participate in a focus group discussion about their behavior and preferences as they relate to discussing politics and public affairs. Participation in the focus group was one of many opportunities for students to earn extra credit in their class. Prior to the focus groups, students completed a short survey that collected basic demographics (age, gender, race/ethnicity), and five indicators of online news behavior which included keeping up with the news, looking online for news or information about politics, reading online news comment sections, posting an opinion online in a public forum, and posting in online forum about politics. A total of 39 young adults from across the political spectrum with diverse interest in politics and political engagement participated in the focus groups. Details about the participants in each unique focus group are provided below.

Focus Group 1: University on US West Coast

A total of six participants (two males and four females) between the ages of 26 and 38 attended the focus group. Responses to the questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as follows: one Democrat, two Independents, and four who indicated some other party affiliation – one Asian, two Caucasians, and three mixed race individuals (Caucasian and Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern, respectively). Participants reported between one and three indicators of online news behavior.

Focus Group 2: University on US East Coast

A total of four participants (two males and two females) between the ages of 18 and 35 attended the focus group. Responses to the questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as follows: two Democrats, one Republican, and one Independent; three Caucasians and one African-American. Participants reported between one and five (all) indicators of the above referenced online news behavior.

Focus Group 3: University in Southwest US

A total of 16 participants (8 males and 8 females) between the ages of 19 and 25 (and one 36-year-old) attended the focus group. Responses to the questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as follows: 6 Democrats, 4 Republicans, 4 Independents, and 2 individuals who identified only as "conservative"; 1 Asian, 2 Black or African-American, 2 Latino/Hispanic, and 11 Caucasians. Participants reported between one and five (all) indicators of the above referenced online news behavior.

Focus Group 4: University in Southern US

Participants. A total of seven participants (three males and four females) between the ages of 19 and 25 attended the focus group. Responses to the questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as follows: four Democrats, two Republicans, and one Independent; one Asian and five Caucasians (four of which noted Hispanic descent). Participants reported between two and five (all) indicators of the above referenced online news behavior.

Focus Group 5: University in Western US

A total of four participants (one male and three females) between the ages of 23 and 26 attended the focus group. Responses to the questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as follows: three Republicans, one Independent, and no Democrats; four Caucasians (none noting Hispanic descent). Participants reported between two and four indicators of the above referenced online news behavior.

Focus Group 6: University in Southern US

A total of two participants (one male, one female) between the ages of 25 and 29 attended the focus group. Responses to the questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as follows: one Democrat and one Republican; both Caucasians. Participants reported zero and one indicator of the above referenced online news behavior respectively.

After the focus groups were conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed. The authors used a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to begin interpreting each of the six focus group discussion transcripts independently. Next, we turned to existing deliberative theory and identified three categories through which to interpret and report our findings. This method is described by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) as deductive or etic in fashion.

Results

Having previously reviewed deliberative theory, we organized our findings into the following three categories: (1) Participant expectations: this category describes who people prefer to interact with and how they describe people with whom they do not want to discuss politics. (2) Goals of the interaction: this category details how participants described their aims in discussing public affairs. (3) The character of the discourse: this category addresses the type of interactions people desire and disfavor. A final category, in addition to the three inspired by deliberative theory, emerged in the focus group discussions, which focused on the similarities and differences between online and offline political discourse.

Participant Expectations

In describing the people with whom they prefer to engage in political discussions, both online and offline, participants indicated a preference for engaging with people with whom they have close relationships, those who they consider knowledgeable and informed, and those who are flexible in their views and remain calm during discussions.

Close Others. Participants reported a hesitance to discuss politics with anyone with whom they did not already have a close relationship. Primary discussion partners included family members, friends, romantic partners, roommates, classmates, and people with whom they share membership in teams and organizations. Trust and respect were common reasons given for participants' preference for engaging with close others over acquaintances or strangers. Many times, respondents noted that they were more comfortable with close others because those interactions were less likely to lead to an argument. One respondent noted that although he never posts about politics online, he does not hesitate to engage with his family and close friends. Some respondents even voiced a desire for more political discussion with the people they interact with regularly. Furthermore, engaging in political discussions with family members was recognized as a socialization and learning tool which prepared them to discuss civic topics with others. One participant stated, "I think in our family there's a lot of talk about politics, so you know, I've learned how to listen and then talk with friends and family."

Informed Others. Being knowledgeable about politics and well-informed about current events was a common theme in participants' choice of discussion partners. Although there were some conflicting opinions expressed about college students' ability to thoughtfully discuss politics, overall, focus group participants enjoyed interactions with people who they perceived as credible and informed. The desire to discuss public affairs with knowledgeable and credible others even extended to political elites. Participants described having an opportunity to discuss public affairs with their state and local representatives as ideal, "Our representatives don't know what the majority of us believe. Aside from voting we don't have that many ways to get through to them, so I think [discussions] would be a neat way to get around that." Overall, they described an interest in talking with people they trust and from whom they could learn. In describing his preference for discussions with informed others, one participant stated that "more people should be informed about politics," and that those "who speak up who are ignorant don't have that much credibility."

Flexible, Moderate, and Calm. While they enjoy talking with informed others who help broaden their own insight, participants do not enjoy rigid and inflexible conversation partners—that is, partners who appear unlikely to budge on their views. Also undesirable are overly passionate and/or emotional others. Focus group participants wanted to be able to have conversations about political issues which can sometimes be "hot-button" without their conversation partner becoming overly excited. This preference extended to avoiding discussions with people who fall on partisan or ideological extremes. A discussion participant noted,

> The big thing that I don't like isn't people that disagree with me, it's people who take themselves too seriously. I've debated people on both sides who just act like they're on some moral crusade and if X bill or resolution is not approved, it's going to be the worst thing in the world, and that just kind of annoys me.

Another discussant expressed dissatisfaction with the way that political media and the discussion surrounding public affairs encourages people to perform polar stances,

> In today's country, you can't be in the middle. The system is set up so that you have to be on one side of the conflict. With the extreme rhetoric that's being thrown out by both sides, a [preferable] space [would be one] in which we can get moderates, independents, back-and-forth kind of people to discuss [matters].

Goals

Participants described engaging in conversations about politics for reasons that primarily revolved around teaching, learning, and persuading. The aim of these encounters did extend beyond purely exchanging perspectives. People also saw discursive encounters, both online and offline, as a way to change the perspective of the people with whom they spoke and as a way to further explore and develop their own points of view.

Getting Information and Developing Perspective. Participants saw political conversations as a way to gain new information and better understand the perspectives of their partners. One focus group participant stated, "Whether or not we agree or disagree at the end, if I was able to move forward in my thinking, those are some of the best conversations that I've had." Gaining knowledge and information applied not only to those who expressed their own point of view, but also to those who solely listened to or observed political discussions. That is, even those who did not actively engage still enjoyed gaining information and/or alternative perspectives through listening or observing discussions both online and off. In regards to political discussions, particularly those that take place online, one participant noted, "I like to be informed but I don't like to engage. I keep opinions to myself."

Giving Information and Persuading. People felt they could express their own views and shed new light on a topic that their conversation partners had not previously realized. Participants discussed conversation goals that revolved around correcting others' mistakes. One participant described an experience online when she reached out to a relative via a social networking site to let her know that the political article she had commented on earnestly was in fact a satirical article and not actual news. Another participant described engaging in political interactions in order to "get someone to see things the way you see them, not necessarily change their opinion but like just educate them."

Although at times mentioned separately, giving and getting information and perspective were not mutually exclusive goals. One participant noted,

> It's always interesting to see their views, it might not change mine but it's always good to have informed understanding of

how other people see it and maybe you can inform them and tell them what they're missing or overlooking because they have such a strong opinion.

Another discussant described interaction with the combined goal of both listening to and expressing thoughts and opinions: "I don't know much about this issue, you don't know much about this issue, let's share what we do know and feel out what we feel like is the right choice."

Discourse

During the focus group discussions, people described both what they did and did not like about the discourse surrounding politics and public affairs. Civility, many times discussed in terms of respect, emerged as a dominant theme. Whether describing on- or off-line interactions, participants consistently voiced a preference for discourse that was respectful of the conversation members. In conjunction with civility was a preference for interactions that focused on commonalities rather than differences between people.

Civil. Focus group participants described several different interactions as uncivil and thus undesirable. Personal insults and aggressive behavior were detailed. One respondent stated, "I don't listen to people that yell. If someone starts yelling I shut down . . . There's no reason for them to belittle you for something that you think." Multiple participants mentioned encountering personal insults, particularly ad hominem attacks that focused on their race and/or gender. One woman described,

> I have a Hispanic name and a lot of the things I post show my background. Most of my comments are insulted or dismissed because I'm a woman, not because I'm Hispanic. If you're a woman it so easily goes there.

Another respondent described her hesitation engaging in political discussions online, "I feel like if I were to speak out, we're just automatically targeted because you're a woman [. . .] They challenge your intelligence—or who you are." Aggressive online behavior extended to personal threats. One respondent described a chilling incident she experienced after posting political commentary in an online forum, "Some guy commented that he hopes I get raped. In that instance I went into his Facebook and reported it versus in another site where I couldn't do anything."

Although civility was a prevailing theme, this did not override people's desire for interesting conversation. Although they wanted it to remain respectful, participants noted that they still wanted to hear conflicting points of view. One discussion participant said that "you should still have some conflict—it needs to be interesting. If it's a boring conversation I'm just going to zone out—especially online."

Collaborative. Several participants described a preference for interactions that were collaborative and supportive in nature and focused on commonalities rather than the differences among discussants. One respondent described the positive experience of feeling supported during an online encounter:

> When I have been attacked online there have been people who jump in and say it doesn't have to go that way and engage in a better way or back me up. So, when someone validates it and says I never thought of that or that's a good argument or comes in and polices others and backs me up—that's nice.

Another focus group participant described his preference for discussion as a "common goal that will help unite both sides." This theme extended into political party identifiers. Multiple people described their aversion to political discourse that focuses on political party labels and other identifying factors. One respondent stated that she "would love an open space where you can say 'I don't want to be a Democrat or a Republican or liberal or conservative. I want to be able to talk about the issues.'" Identifying and focusing on political partisanship was seen by many as a negative heuristic in that it opened the door for unfounded judgment and ad hominem attacks. One respondent noted that "There are connotations that come with disclosing party—the labels come with a predetermined idea of what kind of person you are." While another participant stated that "I don't want to know which party they identify with. Voice your opinion; no one has to know which party you are in."

Online and Offline

In delineating online and offline political discussion, respondents resoundingly expressed a preference for in-person interactions. Although nearly every respondent described collecting information from online sources, when it came to discursive engagement, that which happened offline was considered higher quality and more valuable. Finally, online spaces were considered by respondents to be more prone to incivility and other threatening behavior.

Desirability. In terms of preferences for online or offline political discourse, it was clear that most participants preferred engaging in political discussions in offline settings. Participants repeatedly suggested venues like bars, coffee shops, and other more personal settings as places they would enjoy engaging in political discussion. At times participants were very blunt about their preference, saying, for example, "I don't think I talk politics online at all. I don't think online is the place to talk anything most of the time" or "I'd much rather go to something like [an in-person meeting] than sit online." At times, participants described the emotional appeal of an in-person discussion compared to something online:

> There's just a personal touch to having an in-person conversation with someone . . . You can say whatever you want online but when you're having a discussion in person you don't say the same stuff that you say online . . . I just feel like having an in-person conversation adds sort of a human element to it.

Value. This is not to say that participants did not engage in political activity online but rather that they had serious misgivings about actively participating in discussions online and this influenced the way in which they engaged online. One participant said that they never posted online because of the potential for arguments. Others echoed the sentiment and said that they thought of the Internet as a place to gather information or passively participate, but when it came to actually having discussions with others they would seek out in-person discussions, and often with family or friends. Online resources were seen by many participants as a convenient and accessible way to gather information, but they would ultimately use that information in in-person discussions: "I like to find my information online so that I'm getting . . . a variety of sources that have different ideological slants; but then I like to discuss those things with actual people."

Quality. Participants felt that an online environment was more threatening, in certain ways, than an offline setting. Participants agreed that people are not as careful about what they say online and that they can sometimes be outright cruel. This was evident in comments like "I choose not to participate because sometimes I'll like read an article and then scroll down to the comments section which is always scary," and "The Internet allows a lot of people to be close-minded since it's not personal, so they're not seeing how they're harming someone they don't know who the person is, so it's not really civil discussion." This sense that the Internet was a sort of unrestrained space led many participants to suggest that online discussion settings would require intense and consistent moderation if they were to be successful at facilitating political discourse.

Discussion

These focus group discussions help us better understand the ways in which young people today think about and engage in political discussion. Specifically, we identified four ways in which preferences and aversions to political discussion can be considered, the first three of which apply to both online and offline settings: (1) Participants prefer discussion partners who are calm, informed, and interpersonally close. (2) Participants discuss politics and public affairs with the aim of getting and giving information, and persuading others. (3) People prefer political interactions that are characterized by civility and collaboration. (4) Online, compared to offline, discussions are widely considered less desirable and of a lower quality overall.

Our results show that when it comes to political engagement, people prefer interactions with interpersonally close others for both practical and psychological reasons. Geographical proximity predicts close relationships (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950) and, consequently, the people with whom we interact most often are likely to be influenced by the same immediate economic and geopolitical factors and share similar political viewpoints (Mutz, 2006). We also know that people selectively expose themselves to information sources that are compatible with their already-held views (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2008). Given the finding that our participants enjoyed discussion as a means to persuade others, people in close relationships are likely to hold one another in higher regard, evoke fewer negative feelings, and require less effort to persuade than strangers or distant others. The participants in our focus groups also preferred calm and knowledgeable interaction partners, which indicates their desire for deliberative ideals in terms of civil discussion and opportunities to gain new information.

Among our focus group participants, political conversations were widely considered a way to learn about political topics and differing perspectives, and also to provide information or persuade. The described goals are inherently deliberative, particularly as it relates to aims of "producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (Chambers, 2003, p. 309). The focus group participants, though not using the word deliberation, described a preference for deliberative practice in their political interactions. Beyond listening to others and feeling heard, they hoped opinions on both sides would evolve and reflect the perspectives voiced.

Deliberative descriptors emerged again when participants characterized the discourse in which they prefer to engage and in describing the reasons for which they avoid online political discussion. Participants voiced a desire for engaging in political discourse that is civil and collaborative. The term "respectful consideration" is even used in describing what it means to deliberate (Gastil, 2008). Many participants reported incivility as a reason for avoiding online political interactions. Termed the *online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2004), people feel freer to express themselves in an online (rather than offline) environment. This expression can come in the form of increased disclosure of personal information, or by acting in normatively less desirable ways, such as using insults and threatening language. Although the Internet presents a unique opportunity for citizen engagement and deliberation, the nature of online spaces opens the door for incivility which many participants noted was reason enough to disengage.

The finding that young people hold online political discussion in such poor regard is interesting given young people's dominant presence on the Internet relative to other age groups. Research shows that Internet use is nearly completely ubiquitous among today's teens and young adults (Perrin & Duggan, 2015), but our focus groups revealed that while young people might use the Internet at extremely high rates and gather online with their peers via social media, many of them prefer to have substantive discussions offline. Our focus group participants remarked that online spaces were undesirable for political discussion because the environment is often seen as threatening or unpleasant. People are likely to avoid undesirable situations and seek out more comfortable spaces, like with close friends and family and civil and agreeable others.

Another conclusion to draw from this research is that the things young people yearn for in political discussion often contradict or interfere with one another. In particular, their ideal discussions often cannot be accomplished with the behavior in which they admit to engaging. Participants expressed that they are interested in interacting with people of varying viewpoints and recognize the benefits of doing so; however, they admit to interacting mostly with close others and a preference for discussions with those who share similar views. They are also reluctant to interact with others online—the place they are most likely to encounter people with differing views. Participants also noted that they want calm, civil discourse but admit to getting bored with discussions that lack passion. Although participants described a preference for collaborative discourse where people look out for each other, very few mentioned behaving in that way themselves. The responsibility for creating an environment conducive to productive political discourse often seems to fall on the shoulders of others. Accomplishing the broader goal of widespread deliberative discourse about pressing political issues will require coming to terms with this dialectic.

While such contradictions about public affairs discussion are likely to be frustrating to observers and to those who hope to engage young people in discussions about politics and the news, there is good cause for optimism as well. A common thread running through each focus group discussion was a passion and desire for deliberative ideals. The research reported here opens the door to future research focused on practical steps that online journalists can implement to improve the quality of online political discussion. To engage young people, practitioners will need to balance calm, civil discourse and exciting, involved debate. This interaction could come in the form of journalists answering reader questions, op-ed writers responding to commenters, or newsrooms highlighting reader comments (Jolly, 2014). Research has shown that this type of personal engagement between journalist and reader can positively affect the deliberative tone of user commentary, decrease incivility, and increase commenters' use of evidence (Stroud, Scacco, & Curry, 2015). Research on the effects of self-awareness on

behavior (e.g., Beaman, Klentz, Diener, & Svanum, 1979) suggests that reminding people of their deliberative ideals might help encourage discussion participants to behave more consistently with those ideals. Further research can determine which interventions are effective in engaging young people, in particular. Finally, multiple participants in these focus groups expressed a disdain for partisan politics and even political party identifiers. Future research could take up this aversion by using experimental conditions to investigate the content and quality of discussion in platform void of partisan identifiers.

While we are confident in the utility of the findings reported here, we acknowledge some important limitations in our methods. First, despite the geographical diversity of our sample, it is, nonetheless, a small sample and any conclusions should be appropriately tempered. Second, our sample selection procedures were biased toward college student respondents. Because students were given extra course credit for their participation, this may have attracted fewer students with higher grades since they might have been less inclined to engage in extra credit activities. Additionally, responses about online discussion likely varied depending on one's online and news use behavior. This focus group research is not meant to offer individual correlations and predictions although further quantitative research might address these relationships. For all of these reasons, the results herein are descriptive and cannot be generalized onto the broader population.

The research reported here synthesizes responses from selected young people across the United States to create a frame within which to better understand how young people approach (or avoid) political discussion in online spaces. We should note that not all young people engage with politics in the same ways and that college students and the Millennial generation engender a great deal of diversity both demographically and in terms of preferences and access. Similarly, young people engage differently across various online and social media platforms—not all online spaces are used in the same ways. This research builds upon a growing body of literature that is tracing the changing dynamics of engagement with politics and the news. While work from Vromen et al. (2015) provides evidence that young people prefer online and discussion-based means of engagement, our research uncovers the specific preferences which practitioners may harness to fuel their engagement. Social online platforms, particularly those offered by newsrooms, increasingly have the opportunity to supply this space. The unique nature of the Internet coupled with the psychological and communication phenomena that affect online users greatly influence the quality of mediated interactions. Anonymity, disinhibition, and the adoption of antisocial online mores can leave online discourse lacking civility, and citizens opting out of the conversation; but these are not insurmountable obstacles.

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