

Challenges for an SNS-based public sphere in 2016

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Abstract

Purpose – Political polarization and incivility manifested itself online throughout the 2016 US presidential election. The purpose of this paper is to understand how features of social media platforms (e.g. reacting, sharing) impacted the online public sphere during the 2016 election.

Design/methodology/approach – After conducting in-depth interviews with politically interested young people and applying deductive coding procedures to transcripts of the interviews, Dahlberg's (2004) six normative conditions for the public sphere were used to empirically examine this interview data.

Findings – While some participants described strategies for productive political discussion on Social Networking Sites (SNS) and a willingness to use them to discuss politics, many users' experiences largely fall short of Dahlberg's (2004) normative criteria for the public sphere.

Research limitations/implications – The period in which these interviews were conducted in could have contributed to a more pessimistic view of political discussion in general.

Practical implications – Scholars and the public should recognize that the affordances of SNS for political discussion are not distributed evenly between different platforms, both for the sake of empirical studies of SNS moving forward and the state of democratic deliberation.

Originality/value – Although previous research has examined online and SNS-based political discussion as it relates to the public sphere, few attempts have been made understand how specific communicative practices or platform-specific features of SNS have contributed to or detracted from a healthy public sphere.

Keywords Political communication, Social media, Public sphere, 2016 US presidential election, Qualitative research methods

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Increasing partisanship in the USA made the 2016 presidential election one of the most polarized in recent history (Doherty *et al.*, 2016; Soergel, 2016). While free political expression is nothing new, the platforms to voice these opinions are changing. In 2016, nearly one-third of Social Networking Site (SNS) users sometimes or frequently commented, discussed or posted about politics. Additionally, the election coincided with the first time most Americans received their news from social media (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016), which is most pronounced among young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 (Mitchell *et al.*, 2015). While SNS are often perceived as close-minded spaces for discussion and some areas of the web provide safe haven for hate groups (Duggan and Smith, 2016; Feldman, 2015; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016), some are optimistic about their democratic potential (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012). Scholars like Bennett *et al.* (2011) reject narrow definitions of "political participation" in favor of less formal SNS-based participation they say is the future



of political involvement. These outcomes point to the greater potential of SNS to serve as online public spheres that foster productive political discussion.

Jürgen Habermas's (1996) idea of the public sphere – a place to share opinions and news in an open environment – has transitioned from solely having implications for traditional media and face-to-face conversations, to impacting computer-mediated communication. SNS are evolving in their functionality and information sharing capabilities, with some existing as ideological “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2001). While social media can be used to facilitate exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints (Messing and Westwood, 2012), they can also be used as tools for spreading misinformation to impressionable audiences of likeminded people (Bessi *et al.*, 2015). These empirical findings call into question the quality of democratic engagement in the online public sphere.

Amongst all research on SNS-based political discussion, there is a gap in the literature regarding a specific evaluation of young adults' communication practices on SNS and their relation to Habermas's conception of a healthy public sphere. Scholars like Weller (2016) have called for more investigation into platform-specific features of SNS like “favoriting,” hashtags, or unfollowing, which has been explored previously (Boyd, 2010; Marwick and Boyd, 2011), but not in the context of a Habermasian public sphere. Prior qualitative research has also established that young people engage in sophisticated political talk, as Jahromi (2011) found in her qualitative work on how teenagers constructed their American identities. From a normative and empirical perspective, it is crucial that both scholars and the public better understand the underlying mechanisms of online deliberation that can make or break the quality of political discussion. With Dahlberg's (2004) six normative conditions for the public sphere serving as a theoretical framework, this study aims to evaluate the democratic quality of everyday political communication among young adults on SNS during the 2016 US presidential election. Using in-depth qualitative interviews and deductive coding procedures as the primary means of analysis (Glesne, 2011; Miles *et al.*, 2014; Saldaña, 2009), we find that some conditional aspects of SNS allowed for practices like ideal role taking and critiquing validity claims, but that ultimately participants' discussions on SNS did not meet Dahlberg's (2004) criteria for a Habermasian public sphere.

Habermas's public sphere

With respect to democratic deliberation, no researcher's influence has been more widespread than that of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas's idea of a “public sphere” was initially conceived as a direct democracy-style space where citizens could engage in dialogue, which would then produce a coherent “public opinion” toward an issue(s) and influence decision-making practices (Habermas, 1989a, b). As Lunt and Livingstone (2013) argue, this conception of the public sphere was rooted in aspects of German and European bourgeoisie society – a feature of Habermas's initial conception of the public sphere that would invite criticism from other scholars who alleged that members of the public could be excluded from this space based on race, sex, nationality and citizenship (Fraser, 2007; Dahlberg, 2004). Although Dahlberg (2014) provides a defense of Habermas's original thesis, Habermas himself also addressed these criticisms (Habermas, 1996, 2006). This new work by Habermas moved away from a bourgeoisie conception of the public sphere to something more fluid and conceded that multiple forms/sites of deliberation were legitimate (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013).

Habermas's (1996) *Between Facts and Norms* outlines a new clarification of the public sphere that functions with the same working definition, where it is “[...] best described as a network for communicating information and points of view [...] [which are then] filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions” (p. 360). Habermas further clarifies his theory with a discussion of civil society, referring to all non-governmental and non-economic associations between people that allow for underlying communicative structures within a public sphere. The importance here of

civil society is that it is deeply enmeshed with the political public sphere and that any iteration of a public sphere can only be sustained with an engaged civil society. Habermas also addressed the changing mass media environment and its contribution to: making the public sphere more inclusive by expanding its reach; and making the idea of what constitutes a public sphere more abstract. He argues that the role of the press should be to reinforce an enlightened civil society, while simultaneously being independent of external political/social pressure and receptive to civil society's concerns.

Habermas (2006) further clarifies this relationship between the media and the public sphere, citing two critical requirements: the independence of media from their social environments and free-flowing feedback between a self-regulated press and the public. Despite Habermas's assertion that many mediated forms of deliberation amount to a weak public, he goes on to argue that these publics still have an impact on decision-making processes at elite levels, as evidenced by the rise of so-called "issue voters." At the same time, Habermas points to market-based motivations and a relatively uninformed civil society as threats to his decades-long model of deliberation.

The internet as a public sphere

With the emergence of the internet, Habermas's idea of the public sphere has migrated to online forums. To help foster healthy online political spheres, Bohman (2004) states the public sphere must promote free and equal dialogue where dissenting opinions can exist. Thus, the emergence of a global, online political public sphere has led some to theorize this will either increase or decrease heterogeneous political discussion (Plant, 2004). Whereas once people were exposed to those in their close personal network, the internet has allowed for individuals to gather perspectives globally and hear other worldviews (Papacharissi, 2002). However, there are significant concerns about this globalization of ideas, namely that individuals can now seek out likeminded people to constantly reinforce their beliefs.

This fear of homogenous political discussion has been widely studied within political communication literature. Sunstein (2001) argued that specific features of computer-mediated communication can ultimately destabilize open political dialogue, as individuals can self-select into online spaces made up entirely of like-minded arguments resembling something like an echo chamber. Within these echo chambers, individuals are more likely to share societal identities (i.e. political opinions), where individuals are then more vulnerable to group influence, gender typing, and stereotyping (Postmes *et al.*, 1998). Indirect inequalities can also be procured from an ability, or lack of ability, to access the internet, resulting in an overrepresentation of some demographics over others (Baek *et al.*, 2011). Despite this, many still see the merits in creating a place online for dialogue, with the possibility of increased opportunities for political participation, deliberation and information gathering in a transnational context (Bohman, 2004; Jennings and Zeitner, 2003; Wang *et al.*, 2009).

Some research has found that some specific features of the internet also foster a more open dialogue (McKenna and Bargh, 1999). While some research has criticized anonymity online, others have found that a lower sense of social risks might encourage individuals to espouse dissenting opinions (Stromer-Galley, 2003). Likewise, online forums can enhance contributions from individuals who might be disadvantaged (i.e. social anxiety, dissenting views) and reduce the impact of being judged on the basis of race or gender (McKenna and Bargh, 1999). Due to the potential for increased involvement in political discussion, there is also a possibility for increased civic participation (Kavanaugh *et al.*, 2005). Online news plays an important role in this relationship. Looking exclusively on sharing news on SNS, Ma *et al.* (2014) found that users who felt their networks were made up of close, likeminded ties were more likely to share news on their profiles. Others like Wells and Dudash (2007) have found that young people online who used the internet for news and information often

found it difficult to determine the credibility of information they consumed, and that even learning more about politics through credible information discouraged them from getting more involved in politics. However, when individuals seek out traditional news media to complement their online media use, the likelihood of a heterogeneous political discussion and civic participation network increases (Brundidge, 2010; Kaufhold *et al.*, 2010; Shah *et al.*, 2005). Other research has supported this idea that traditional media or even word-of-mouth sources of information compliment these kinds of online information seeking habits (Parmelee and Perkins, 2012).

The public sphere in a SNS context

Habermas defines the public sphere as “[...] a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed” (Habermas, 1989a, b, p. 1). These spaces ideally share what Freelon (2010) describes as Habermas’s “conceptual trio”: the notion that only rational-critical arguments are used when individuals contribute to discussion; that only topics of public concern are discussed; and that discussions remain open to all members of the public (p. 1181). Therefore, public opinion can be thought of as the coalescing of citizens’ opinions and thoughts, generated from dialogue, with the goal of influencing public policy. Habermas further articulates his conception by suggesting that face-to-face deliberation is necessary for considered public opinions – opinion changes based on quality information from discussion and objective argument (Habermas, 2006). This led to the consideration of “mediated” public spheres, where there is no face-to-face interaction, a lack of reciprocity between speakers/listeners, and the outsized gatekeeping role of the mass media. Specifically, Boyd’s (2010) essay on “networked publics” spoke to this ability of SNS to restructure publics entirely but provide the same basic functions of a traditional space for discussion. Rather than being restricted by physically disseminating messages between two parties, Boyd argues that networked publics constituted of digital “bits” allow for the dissemination of messages to be quicker and more diffuse. She goes on to explain that certain structural affordances like permanently digitizing exchanges (persistence), the ease of copying messages (replicability), the democratization of spreading information (scalability), and the relative ease of cataloging/searching for information (searchability) inevitably change the structure, but not necessarily the content, of these publics. The much-discussed phenomenon context collapse, another structural feature of SNS, refers to the clash of personal and professional ties in a public digital space where the appropriateness of personal or professional expressions vary (Marwick and Boyd, 2011).

Optimistic attitudes toward the role that SNS play in public discussion often convey the redefined power relationship between media producers and consumers that has characterized the diminished power of mass media in the late twentieth century (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2004). Benkler (2006) argues that the ease of communicating via SNS allow individuals to reorient themselves from passive audiences into active participants. Others envision SNS development as a means of facilitating “counter publics” where challenges to the status quo can be articulated and enacted openly (Jackson and Welles, 2015; Lee *et al.*, 2015; Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012). Public opinion scholars have found some empirical support for the role of “issue publics,” where citizens are only interested in a single political topic (Krosnick, 1998; Neuman, 1998; Krosnick *et al.*, 1994; Converse, 1964; Almond, 1956).

Other scholars have been less sanguine about the emerging role that SNS platforms have had in public opinion formation. Jackson and Valentine (2014) highlight some of the challenges Twitter must overcome related to anonymity and a lack of physical presence. Others like Iosifidis (2011) argue that the democratizing effects of the internet are overstated, citing the chaotic and highly partisan discussion that tends to drown out the

rational-critical discussion that Habermas (1989a, b) envisioned. Iosifidis's (2011) criticism of the internet also extends to its role as a profitable hub of corporate activity, a view Fuchs (2014) echoes, who argues that a critical, materialistic understanding of these platforms should serve as the foundation for SNS analysis.

Understanding the role that exposure to cross-cutting dialogue serves in the formation of rational-critical arguments on SNS remains a major focus of communication scholars. Previous research has found that SNS use alone has had a positive relationship with cross-cutting exposure (Kim, 2011; Burgess and Green, 2009) and that SNS use contributes to an individual's network diversity (Kim *et al.*, 2015). This diversity has been found to extend to the offline world as well, with Barnidge (2017) documenting how social media users perceive more political disagreement than non-users, especially among those who consume news on SNS. While Barnidge (2017) relied on self-reported measures of perceived political disagreement, Colleoni *et al.* (2014) used machine learning to find that Twitter can resemble an "echo chamber-like structure of communication" among certain partisan actors (p. 328). Other research indicates that the greatest opportunity for individuals to be exposed to cross-cutting political dialogue may include apolitical online groups where political discussion occurs incidentally (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009).

Though scholars have devoted attention to the benefits and detriments of online political discussion, little research has assessed the quality of everyday political talk within an SNS-based public sphere. While Dahlberg (2004) provides a set of six normative conditions to assess the public sphere-like quality of everyday communicative practices, these criteria have yet to be examined empirically. Consequently, there is an opportunity to draw upon Dahlberg's framework to critically assess the quality of everyday political talk in the online public sphere, particularly among young adults, considering this population predominantly uses SNS for receiving information. In addition to its popularity amongst young people, previous research has demonstrated that using these platforms for information and discussion constitute new arenas for political engagement, participation, and involvement that are consequential to the political landscape (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2014; Pang and Goh, 2016; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2016; Zhou and Pinkleton, 2012). Not only will this introduce an overlooked theoretical framework to the analysis of democratic deliberation and discussion, such a starting point will allow us to examine and reflect upon everyday discourse practices on SNS, as well as suggest future avenues of research for quantitative scholars interested in assessing the quality and conditions of healthy SNS-based public spheres.

Dahlberg conceptualizes six public sphere conditions for evaluating everyday communicative practices. For Dahlberg, discussion must: allow for reasoned critique of problematic validity claims (i.e. claims about the truth); demonstrate that those involved critically examine their own values or positions (i.e. reflexivity); involve individuals that genuinely seek to understand opposing positions (what Dahlberg calls "ideal role taking"); prevent forms of deception or self-deception (i.e. be sincere); ensure that all relevant positions and people are included in the discussion (what Dahlberg calls "formal and discursive equality"); and be autonomous from state or corporate power structures. Though Dahlberg concedes that such a conceptualization is indeed an idealization for evaluating the democratic value of routine political talk, he argues that this framework may still be useful for assessing how it is "approximated in practice" (p. 13). As such, the following research questions have been posed:

- RQ1. How do young adults' everyday communicative practices on SNS promote a healthy online public sphere?
- RQ2. What every day communicative practices of young adults are possibly detrimental to the maintenance of a healthy online public sphere?
- RQ3. How do the underlying tools associated with SNS platforms contribute/detract from a healthy online public sphere?

Methods

The present study relies on qualitative interview data, collected during the 2016 US presidential election. 30–45-min semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from a large university in the Pacific Northwest. Members of the research team used convenience and snowball sampling methods to recruit college students who expressed an interest in politics (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Given the importance of SNS-based political engagement amongst young people (Bennett *et al.*, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2014; Zhou and Pinkleton, 2012), it was determined that this would be an appropriate population to sample from. In total, 33 participants were recruited, which was deemed to be the saturation point for this sample of participants (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Informed consent was established in all interviews and participants were compensated for their time with extra credit or a gift card.

The average participant was 20 years of age, which is only two years younger than the average age of undergraduates at this specific university. In total, 15 males and 18 females were included in our sample. In all, 24 participants were white, 3 identified as “mixed,” 2 were African-American, 2 were Hispanic, 1 identified as Asian-American and 1 participant preferred not to answer. 13 participants identified as liberal/Democrat, 14 identified as conservative/Republican, 4 identified as independents and 2 identified as libertarians.

Interview questions from previous literature were adapted for the present study, which included broad questions on posting about political posts or discussion on the internet/SNS (Stromer-Galley, 2003), general social media habits (Wang *et al.*, 2009), political issues that were most important to participants (Jahromi, 2011), social media vs the internet generally as a source for political information (Parmelee and Perkins, 2012), and participants’ most trusted source of political information (Wells and Dudash, 2007). In addition, unique questions were developed for this study to understand more about online political participation and young adults’ motivations for seeking information and discussing politics on SNS during the 2016 US presidential primary elections. The protocol for this study consisted of a variety of prompts, such as feelings questions, background questions, experience questions, opinion questions and grand tour questions (Miles *et al.*, 2014; Glesne, 2011). The interview protocol with the relevant questions for the current study is included in supplementary materials as Appendix 1.

Once all interviews were conducted, the research team transcribed the interviews and assigned pseudonyms to each individual participant. Then, researchers followed inductive and deductive coding procedures outlined by Miles *et al.* (2014) and Saldaña (2009) to analyze the data. First, a sample of the interviews were inductively coded in order to create a preliminary codebook organized around the central concepts of the study. Then, to capture statements involving the processes and feelings associated with how participants used SNS as a public sphere-like environment for political discussion, Elemental and Affecting coding methods were used. Once relevant statements were identified, they were further deductively coded with Dahlberg’s (2004) six normative conditions of democratic communication in the Habermasian public sphere that were previously outlined. A summary of findings from the present study as they relate to these six conditions is provided in Table I. Following the coding of the interviews, researchers generated code categories based on Dahlberg’s six-pronged criteria, and from these categories, data themes were developed using a thematic analysis-style approach. Specifically, the following themes were identified: negotiating the consequences of SNS political expression, reluctance to welcome all relevant positions, and competition over consensus.

Findings

Negotiating consequences of SNS political expression

In a majority of the interviews, participants regularly emphasized their reluctance in discussing politics publicly on social media as a means of maintaining personal and

professional relationships. Often, they felt that any political expression on SNS would invite backlash from users in their network who did not share the same beliefs or disliked seeing political information on their newsfeeds. Amelia, a 20-year-old Democrat, expresses this same sentiment and her strategies in avoiding “family friction”:

Amelia: My entire family outside of, like, my mom and grandpa are all extreme conservatives and we’re, like, the only liberals of the family, so it really kinda causes some family disconnect [...] since I got my new Facebook I didn’t – I haven’t really told any of my family members that I have it [...] especially since it’s election season, I really could care less, um, of what their beliefs are verse [*sic*] mine and cause any family friction that isn’t already there [...].

These kinds of tensions have been explored in previous literature and are often referred to as “context collapse” by some scholars, with the idea being that a range of diffuse social groups are collapsed into one (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). However, Dahlberg’s (2004) notion of ensuring that all relevant positions are included in discussion is in direct contradiction with the quote above and most of the interviews analyzed in the present study. For those who felt like online discussion resulted in their views being mischaracterized, strong negative backlash, or relational strife, there was a clear lack of opportunity in discussing politics as a means of generating cohesive public opinions (Habermas, 1996, 2006). In turn, this general avoidance of SNS-based political discussion and a recognition of its consequences presented major obstacles for all other aspects of Dahlberg’s (2004) criteria for a healthy public sphere.

The same chilling effect on discussion and deliberation was also found amongst a small, but notable group of participants who explicitly mentioned their fear of offending current or future employers with public political discussions. Close to a fifth of all participants corroborated this point about professional or academic affiliations preventing them from engaging with politics in a public setting online. Even some participants who enjoyed provoking users with “triggering” political statements recognized this need to be cautious, as 18-year-old conservative Fernanda stated in her interview:

Fernanda: [...] we have to be very careful, because later on in the future when we proceed to higher education or, like, we try to pursue like a job at, like, the White House or any other government positions [...] it will be kinda thrown back at us if we post something that people might find very offensive [...] we have to be careful in what we post, because then, uh, they can use it against us later on in the future [...].

The above quote has some implications concerning Dahlberg’s (2004) point about power structures – namely, these kinds of concerns over employment and maintaining one’s public image speak directly to the power of state and corporate forces in impeding deliberative activities.

Table I.
Summary of participants’ adherence to Dahlberg’s (2004) criteria for a public sphere

Criteria	Summary	Evaluation
Reasoned critique of problematic validity claims	Allowing for problematic truth claims to be debated amongst those potentially affected by the claims	Moderately met
Reflexivity	Individuals involved in the discussion critically examine their own values and positions	Not met
Ideal role taking	Genuinely seeking to understand individuals with opposing positions	Moderately met
Sincerity	Preventing forms of deception or self-deception	Not met
Formal and discursive equality	Ensuring that all relevant positions and individuals are included in the discussion	Not met
Autonomy from state and corporate power	Discussion is wholly independent of state or corporate influence	Not met

Although a majority of participants avoided SNS altogether as a space for political discussion, it is worth noting that several other participants claimed to use these platforms to engage in political discussion. Out of these participants, some claimed that Facebook often had a more public, permanent quality that comprised of a diverse network including family members, which was not an ideal environment to talk about politics. Instead, these users said they favored Twitter for discussion because they could: maintain relatively anonymous Twitter accounts; tailor their Twitter network to users who did invite political topics; and feel safe knowing friends, family or employers were not aware they maintained a Twitter account. Other participants, like 19-year-old Democrat Derrick, explained that they used platforms like Snapchat because it, “[...] deletes itself so I can avoid any repercussions in the long run.” Several participants also mentioned using private group text or chat features as a safe place for discussing politics with close ties who either agreed with their positions or were known to disagree with their beliefs in a civil manner. Out of those participants who did use Facebook for political purposes, some claimed that they used the platform’s “Messenger” feature or private groups that only included these same kinds of close ties. These conversations were often characterized as an opportunity to engage in genuine dialogue about politics, even with those who could “agree to disagree” if necessary. In some sense, it is encouraging that these individuals use SNS tools strategically to engage in these conversations. Although a majority of participants did not discuss politics publicly on social media platforms, at least a third of all participants relied on private messaging or invite-only group features as a way to discuss politics. At the same time, several of these participants also mentioned that they use these techniques to only discuss politics with ideologically similar peers or family, which does not bode well for the principles of ideal role taking, reflexivity, sincerity and critically examining one’s own positions (Dahlberg, 2004).

Reluctance to welcome all relevant positions

As stated in the previous section, participants often avoided SNS altogether to prevent potential backlash from users in their networks. An altogether different issue was that a significant minority of participants regularly disdained the idea of talking to users with opposing political viewpoints on SNS or those outside of their network. It is not as though participants were entirely opposed to talking to those with opposing beliefs, but these discussions were often relegated to face-to-face discussions by a majority of participants. When asked why he does not engage with political posts on social media, 21-year-old Independent Ezekiel responded by saying:

Ezekiel: Because it just gets so heated. And it can get very serious very quickly [...] On social media, like, I don’t really care what these random people have to say. And I don’t think that they really care what I have to say, either. So, I kind of just stay away from the discussion. I kind of just let them talk and just do my own thing.

Similar sentiments expressed by Ian, a 19-year-old Democrat, also point to how political affiliation can often be the deciding factor for whom to engage with in discussion:

Ian: I tend to engage less with strangers because usually back-and-forth online results in nothing except wasted time and maybe I’ll get upset, so I tend not to do that. But usually it’s in agreement or building upon the ideas of people who share similar ideas to myself on social media.

Both answers are representative of similar answers throughout these interviews which often referred to public SNS-based political discussion as “a waste of time,” “heated,” or unnecessarily stress-inducing in some way, which speaks to the inability of social media to foster a sense of discursive equality (Dahlberg, 2004). In tightly controlled environments with strong ties, participants could engage in a productive dialogue. However, when discussions were based around public political posts where anyone could participate,

some avoided comment sections that included uninformed “idiots” and shouting matches. Again, these sorts of pejorative statements directed at the “other side” do little to contribute positively to an environment where ideal role taking or reflexivity could realistically take place (Dahlberg, 2004).

Almost half of all participants reported seeing friends in their network, weak ties in their network, or strangers commenting on posts made by larger outlets dismiss those with opposing political views in real time. Both Democratic and Republican-leaning students pointed to conservative or pro-Trump positions receiving a large amount of backlash. Derrick, a 19-year-old liberal, gives one example of witnessing this in an online discussion group:

Derrick: Online there was a huge, huge debate between the representative of the liberal, Bernie Sanders’ point-of-view on immigration, and the Donald Trump, conservative guy. And while this conservative guy was civil and respectful [...] the Bernie guy is probably not the best person to represent my candidate because I’m not a Bernie supporter. He was very aggressive online and brought in a professor onto online discussion [...] And so he brought in friends on the event page in which there was slandery [*sic*] and, which, that’s the time I was moderating saying, “Please abstain from personal attacks [...]”

This scenario would not allow for the kind of sincere, all-inclusive debate of wide-ranging validity claims that are essential to a well-functioning public sphere (Dahlberg, 2004; Habermas, 1996). Participants with varying political affiliations repeatedly explained that unpopular views were often met with ostracism and getting blocked or banned from pages.

Other experiences demonstrate a genuine desire to engage in political discussion. Matthew, a 20-year-old libertarian who typically votes Republican, expressed a fondness for achieving the kinds of democratic ideals underlying Habermas’s vision of a public sphere:

Matthew: I like that it [political discussion online] presents the opportunity to see, you know, if you have an opinion, it presents you the opportunity to see that other side, and to kind of flesh out your ideas a little bit more with somebody else. It also, you know, sometimes you feel like it – or I feel like it – serves a higher purpose [...].

Matthew was one of the few participants in our sample who admitted that political discussion on social media was an opportunity to learn about other perspectives and reflect on his own positions. Matthew’s sentiments were echoed by John, a 21-year-old fellow conservative, who described political discussion on Facebook as an opportunity to find clarification and learn about how other people are thinking about politics. As Dahlberg (2004) explains, rational communication in the public sphere requires that people be able to critically examine their own “values, assumptions, and interests in light of all other relevant claims and reasons” (p. 8). Discussion in the public sphere must rely on the willingness to think reflexively about one’s own opinions and possibly accept that there may be other opinions that are better. Thus, one of the results of reflexivity is that participants may end up “taking the position of the other” (p. 8), rather than limiting themselves to one point of view. Matthew’s statement that political discussion online “serves a higher purpose” provides an example of how the democratic ideals of the Habermasian public sphere are possible within the realm of SNS.

Despite Matthew’s penchant for reflexivity, he stated throughout his interview that his support for Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election was met with hostility online. Later in the interview, when he was asked if he used anonymous apps to discuss politics, Matthew responded with the following:

Matthew: [...] one of the websites I visit is the politically incorrect board on 4chan, I don’t know if you’ve heard of it. It’s hard to take seriously sometimes, and I don’t know if it should be taken seriously a lot of the time, but it’s one of the, what’s credited as like the birth places of the “alt-right” [...] I don’t know how to define it. It’s just where all the people who became disaffected with politics, the “alt-right” movement I’m talking about just became banded together I guess. I haven’t really spent much time researching it but, um, and there is an appeal to that [...].

Here, Matthew describes the freedom that anonymity affords him when expressing his political opinions and references the “alt-right,” a far-right political movement that the Southern Poverty Law Center has categorized as a hate group (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). He goes on to reference the website 4chan and its “politically incorrect” message board (“/pol/” for short), a known repository of Nazi and white nationalist propaganda (Feldman, 2015). Nothing in Matthew’s interview suggests an endorsement of hate groups, but these sorts of groups and websites are in direct opposition to the kind of public sphere that has been described here (Habermas, 1996, 2006). If anything, Matthew’s response suggests that the normative consequences of feeling ostracized by one’s own SNS network are potentially dire.

It is worthwhile to consider the democratic consequences of SNS users who block individuals who express dissenting opinions online. While Matthew shared his experiences with being blocked, there was no clear consensus among our participants on blocking or unfollowing someone over a political disagreement. This divide in our participants’ responses points to a larger trend of blocking and unfollowing among social media users. According to the Pew Research Center, close to 40 percent of social media users say they have blocked, unfriended, or taken steps to reduce the number of posts they see from certain users in response to their political posts (Duggan and Smith, 2016).

Most of our participants also cited examples of people in their network who openly expressed that they would block or unfriend people who held different political opinions, saw examples of this happen in real time, or were blocked themselves because of their political affiliations. Consider the following example from Rachel, a 20-year-old conservative:

Rachel: I literally just saw this post yesterday. Somebody was posting, like, “I’m unfollowing anyone who is – shows like, admiration or is following Trump at all. If I see you like something I will block you.” Like, stuff like that. Like, maybe, like, let’s just consider everyone’s viewpoints. For me, it’s like, why are we getting so upset about this?

Considering the hostility and polarization of the 2016 election, such reactions are, to an extent, understandable. Yet, it is difficult to ignore the severe democratic consequences of simply blocking opposing perspectives, as this behavior further prevents social media users from considering all relevant positions when forming and defending their political opinions. In terms of Dahlberg’s (2004) normative criteria, the steps that social media users take to block dissenting views has a direct impact on sincerity and potentially encouraging forms of self-deception, not to mention the aforementioned implications of a more homogenous network on discursive equality and ideal role taking. Since SNS users are free to block and unfollow dissenting views, such acts may deceive users into thinking that their political opinions are dominant positions, and that dissenting views are only held by an extreme minority of people. This is not to say that blocking and unfollowing are not appropriate responses in the face of online harassment or political trolling. However, the act of blocking and unfollowing dissenting opinions in the context of rational discussion creates a deceptive environment that hinders users’ “sincere efforts to make known all relevant information, including that which relates to their intentions, interests, needs, and desires” (Dahlberg, 2004, p. 9; Habermas, 2001, p. 34).

Competition over consensus

For the select group of participants who willingly engaged with political opponents on SNS, there was a sense amongst a significant minority that the goal of the discussion was to advance the cause of their own side, either by demonstrating that their side had the facts to back up their arguments or by purposely frustrating the other side. Others said they explicitly avoided these discussions because they devolved into a zero-sum game, with some like 19-year-old moderate Alexia calling it a “lose-lose” scenario. Echoing some of the

statements made by Fernanda about “triggering” opponents, 22-year-old conservative Rebecca expressed a similar fondness for frustrating political opponents:

Rebecca: And then also, um, there’s just this really extreme, annoying person on Facebook that posts political things and I think it’s just hilarious to engage with her, ‘cause I think it’s funny to [...] get her going [...].

Some like Alexia, a 19-year-old moderate, express that they avoid political discussion out of a fear that they will “lose” publicly:

Alexia: [...] I feel like if I did get into some type of Facebook altercation, my goal would be not to be political per say, because I feel like when you get political you’re making arguments that aren’t winnable, and I have a problem with wanting to be right, so I feel like if I got in a political discussion on Facebook I would try to make it more factual than political just because I wouldn’t want to lose in front of all of those people [...].

Such goals for engaging in political discussion online only further reveal that there is a lack of critical self-reflexivity in the SNS public sphere. Several participants used SNS strategically to avoid these public discussions where “winning” was emphasized over consensus, with certain trusted friend groups or private Facebook pages acting as places where all positions were critically examined (Dahlberg, 2004). However, competitive political discussion could also erupt within these spaces. As discussed earlier, a lack of reflexivity prevents individuals from examining their own positions and possibly transcending their original opinions. However, when the goal of political discussion online is to merely compete with others, the democratic potential of deliberation and political discussion in the SNS public sphere erodes. Rather than attempting to come to a consensus or at least understand other perspectives, it seems that “winning the argument” is the primary motivation for political discussion online.

As Alexia admitted, there is a fear of losing a political argument online, and by extension, a fear of being wrong in her opinion publicly. Such an approach to online deliberation ultimately prevents people from coming to terms with the fact that they might be wrong or that it is acceptable to make mistakes in a political discussion. This competitive framework only prevents users from engaging in reflective dialogue, and as a result, may even fortify a deceptive SNS environment where the perception is that the individual user is always correct.

At the same time, certain tools on Facebook like the “react” button allowed for opposing factions of a political argument to snipe at each other publicly, as Rebecca goes on to explain:

Rebecca: Yeah, I think the thing that gets me [...] you know how you can “like” somebody’s comment? When people – so, let’s say you post something [...] this happened to me a long time ago, and I commented on something [...] and a person underneath said some snarky, sarcastic comment, and then if somebody likes it, that’s what really bothers me [...] I feel like the liking thing on Facebook can cause a lot more controversy because you can see the people that like it [...] it’s like, “Aw, that pisses me off!”

Later in the interview, Rebecca described this technique as “passive aggressive,” which was echoed by a handful of other participants. With several participants describing SNS-based discussion as “arguing” in a pejorative sense and select participants wanting to tear the other side down, rational-critical, issue-focused deliberation seems to be lacking in the social media experiences of many participants in this study (Freelon, 2010). As a whole, we find that these participants are not able to engage in Dahlberg’s (2004) conceptualization of ideal role taking or critical self-reflexivity, either because they avoid discussion entirely or actively attempt to tear the other side down as a means of entertainment.

A minority of participants said they were able to engage in some form of “reasoned critique of problematic validity claims” (Dahlberg, 2004). Specifically, out of those

participants who openly discussed politics publicly on social media, many expressed that one of their primary motivations for engaging in SNS-based political discussion was to correct falsehoods. Citing Habermas (1984), Dahlberg (2004) explains that, “engaging in argumentation requires the thematization and reciprocal rational testing of problematic validity claims” (p. 7). Furthermore, Dahlberg defines validity claims as statements that are always “explicitly or implicitly raised in communication and include appeals to the meaning of statements, the truth of propositions, the rightness of norms, and the truthfulness of expressions” (p. 5). Thus, the reasoned critique of problematic validity claims requires an identification and evaluation of any statements that include troublesome facts, definitions, and truth claims. Ultimately, Dahlberg argues that this condition is necessary for the formation of rational public opinion. While this critique relies on SNS users’ willingness to examine their own positions, it also rests on their inclination to identify and critique others’ positions and validity claims.

Though our participants’ experiences during the 2016 US presidential election did not contain much critical reflection occurring within the SNS public sphere, there was a sense that many of these participants’ motivations for discussion were fueled by a desire to identify and correct blatant falsehoods. Consider the following examples from Ken, a 19-year-old liberal, and Eric, a 22-year-old moderate conservative:

Ken: I guess the thing that would probably motivate me the most [to comment on a discussion] is if somebody is posting something that is extremely inaccurate or really in opposition to something that I believe in.

Eric: I have a deep-seated dislike of the misconstruing of facts, and especially when doing so propagates some sort of injustice. And so, if I see someone whose political opinion is being deliberately or otherwise misconstrued in a political discussion, and they are suffering under the onslaught of that, I sometimes – I think I’ve commented to come to the defense of somebody.

Both Ken and Eric’s sentiments are illustrative of our participants’ desire to correct what they perceive in their networks as factually incorrect or misconstrued information. Considering these individuals expressed an appreciation for politics, such motivations for engaging in political discussion within the SNS public sphere are arguably atypical when compared to the average millennial. However, what is most unique about Ken and Eric’s actions is that they seemed to be motivated by extreme circumstances of misinformation or misconceptions. Specifically, Eric’s motivations for defending people in a discussion whose views are being misrepresented seem to require a high threshold. While it is reassuring that these participants are willing to intervene in situations where validity claims are especially problematic, it is concerning that these responses are only triggered by extreme circumstances, and such motivations still may be fueled by a competitive desire to win an argument.

Discussion and conclusion

Using Dahlberg’s (2004) six normative conditions, this paper used in-depth interviews with politically motivated young adults to understand the role of SNS in fostering a healthy public sphere during the 2016 US presidential primaries. Certain features of these platforms allowed for rational-critical deliberation to take place, especially those that allowed for private or group-based discussion. In these private spaces, participants were able to engage in sincere discussion with trusted ties who often varied widely in their ideological beliefs. Relegating this kind of political discussion to private chats/groups could potentially constitute one of the many “spheres” Habermas declared as legitimate in his later works, as well as shield these discussions from corrosive power structures (Lunt and Livingston, 2013; Dahlberg, 2004). Some participants also mentioned that platforms like Facebook allowed them to gauge public reaction to issues or

be exposed to counter-attitudinal views, further contributing to thoughts resembling something like reflexivity (Dahlberg, 2004). Others also recalled coming to the defense of users in their network whose positions were mischaracterized. In some sense, these participants responding to a user's opinions being misrepresented could be construed as a willingness to challenge problematic truth claims, and perhaps even a kind of ideal role taking that would not have been possible without these SNS-based affordances.

At the same time, many interviews revealed that participants' use or aversion to SNS contrasted sharply with Habermas' public sphere. These participants admitted to only discussing politics with like-minded users and blocking/unfollowing users to shield themselves from counter-attitudinal content. Along with many participants who echoed concerns over the consequences of public political statements, this reluctance to engage with a range of users in one's own network is in direct contradiction to Dahlberg's (2004) "formal and discursive equality" requirement. An analysis of these interviews also demonstrated that this lack of welcoming all relevant positions was partly asymmetric, as many participants commonly recognized conservative alienation throughout their newsfeeds. In one instance, this resulted in a conservative participant showing a fondness for more anonymous and openly hostile corners of the internet, which both speaks to the normatively undesirable consequences of this kind of alienation and how the relative anonymity of certain platforms over others functions as a tool that shapes the confines of SNS-based political discussion. For those who willingly engaged in SNS-based political discussion, these exchanges presented a problem for participants who did not want to lose arguments or appear ill-informed in a public setting. In turn, some participants described conversations where the goal was to save face at all costs, presenting obvious problems for Habermasian goals of reflexivity, the avoidance of self-deception, and ideal role-taking.

As with any study, this paper has its limitations. First, the present study does not seek to make any definitive causal arguments for the relationship between SNS use and a healthy public sphere. More work should be done to formally tests that kinds of associations alluded to in these finding here. There is also something to be said for the period in which these data were collected. It could be argued that the results here paint an overly pessimistic view of online political discussion by students, which could be the result of a sampling bias across the participants recruited for this study. However, given that much has been said in the news media about the divisiveness of this election (Soergel, 2016), it is equally plausible that these participants are reflective of the current mood of young people as it relates to political discussion. Is it possible that the most recent election could be a foreshadowing of future mid-term or general elections that will continue along this path of divisiveness? Future studies should attempt to learn more about how specific SNS and their affordances are being used by individuals to accelerate or mitigate this trend of divisiveness.

Despite these limitations, these results point to an overarching sense that many young people in our sample were displeased with online political discussion. Few described SNS-based deliberations as something close to all of Dahlberg's (2004) normative conditions for the public sphere. Others who were more politically engaged or afraid of public criticism seemed to relish the opportunity to engage in political discussion online, sometimes for the sake of learning from other or defending them and other times to prove opponents wrong publicly. If anything, these interviews suggest that SNS functions neither as a panacea for or the death knell for a healthy SNS-based public sphere. Scholars should attempt to understand the myriad ways that individuals use SNS for political discussion and determine the best set of practices possible for creating a Habermasian vision of a public sphere.

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Appendix 1. Online supplementary materials

Interview protocol

- (1) Describe your social media use in a typical day, from the morning to the night.
- (2) What do you typically share on social media? Is it personal information, political information and opinions, news, photos?
- (3) How frequently do you post political information on social media?
- (4) What motivates you to discuss politics on social media, specifically share your political viewpoints?
- (5) With whom do you typically discuss politics with online?

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- (6) When are you most likely to comment on others' posts in your social media networks?
 - (7) How likely are you to express disagreement in an online political discussion?
 - (8) How does that compare to how likely you are to express disagreement in a face-to-face discussion?
 - (9) How are political discussions different for you in comparison to face-to-face discussion?
 - (10) How often are you likely to engage with someone in your network that holds different political opinions than you?

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