

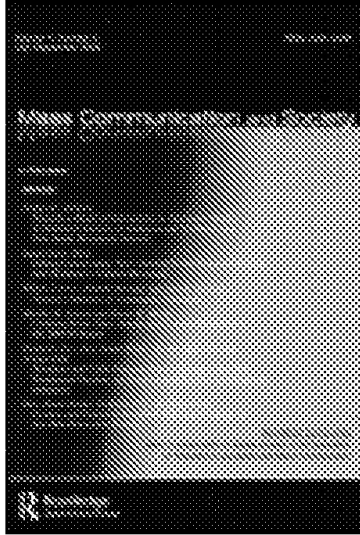
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### Did Social Media Really Matter? College Students' Use of Online Media and Political Decision Making in the 2008 Election

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# Did Social Media Really Matter? College Students' Use of Online Media and Political Decision Making in the 2008 Election

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This study examined college students' use of online media for political purposes in the 2008 election. Social media attention, online expression, and traditional Internet attention were assessed in relation to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. Data from a Web survey of college students showed significant positive relationships between attention to traditional Internet sources and political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. Attention to social media was not significantly related to political self-efficacy or involvement. Online expression was significantly related to situational political involvement but not political self-efficacy. Implications are discussed for political use of online media for young adults.

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During the 2006 and 2008 election seasons, new technologies emerged that enable individuals to participate in media-rich online communities organized around the creation and exchange of media content (Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006; O'Reilly, 2005; Rainie, 2007b; Tapscott & Williams, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Such social media were quite popular in the 2008 election campaign among young adults. For example, young adults used video sharing and social network sites to obtain campaign information and/or share campaign news with others, exchange their political views, and express support for a candidate (Kohut, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008).

As political actors used social media for their campaign, and young adults were relying less on traditional news media and more on new online media for political information (Kohut, 2008), some political and media observers commented that social media played a significant role in the 2008 campaign in affecting young voters' political cognition and behaviors (Hesseldahl, MacMillan, & Kharif, 2008; Marchese, 2008; Owen, 2008). Existing literature on the political utility of social media provides mixed evidence, however. Although some studies have uncovered its beneficial effects on political outcomes such as political efficacy and social capital (Kim & Geidner, 2008; Utz, 2009; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), others have reported no significant linkage between social media use and political cognition and behaviors (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Puig, & Rojas, 2009; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to examine college students' use of online media, namely, social media attention and online expression as well as traditional Internet attention, in relation to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement in the 2008 presidential election. As political campaigns increasingly make use of these new media, it is important to understand the impact on political communication in the contemporary political environment. The present study extends previous research on the political utility of social media by introducing an expanded conception of social media with various forms of user-generated campaign information, and by conceptually differentiating and comparing cognitive and behavioral aspects of social media with traditional Internet sources.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, YouTube, which was invented in 2005 and did not exist during the 2004 presidential election campaign (YouTube.com, 2010), is a video-sharing Web site that both the 2008 major party presidential candidates used to disseminate campaign video.

## POLITICAL DECISION MAKING: EFFICACY AND INVOLVEMENT

Learning effective decision-making skills is a critical component to evaluating and understanding public issues (Beyth-Marom, Fischhoff, Quadrel, & Furby, 1991). Decision-making variables are particularly important in the political process, as they serve democratic theory that presumes an active and informed citizenry (Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). These variables are useful indicators of political behavior, as direct measures such as self-report of voting often provide inaccurate pictures of citizens' political behavior (Leshner & Thorson, 2000).

Among other decision-making variables, a line of research has focused on political self-efficacy and situational political involvement (Austin & Pinkleton, 1999; Austin, Van de Vord, Pinkleton, & Epstein, 2008; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998). Political self-efficacy is a key barometer of a healthy democracy (Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990). It is defined as an individual's belief that through their efforts they can impact political processes (Tan, 1980), and has been shown to be highly predictive of political participation (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002) and voting intent or behavior (Leshner & Thorson, 2000; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Pinkleton et al., 1998).

Situational political involvement is defined as the perceived relevance of an issue at a given moment or the degree of interest in social situations such as an election outcome (Austin & Pinkleton, 1999; Faber, Tims, & Schmitt, 1993; Pinkleton & Austin, 2004; Salmon, 1986; Zaichkowsky, 1985). It is a psychological state "particularly important to political decision making because of its role in motivating information source use and learning" (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, p. 322). Prior research has shown that the more an issue is perceived relevant and interesting, the greater the need for information, which increases information-oriented media use (Chew, 1994). In a political context, situational political involvement is a point of entrance into the political process as the involved voter is more motivated to seek out information, which in turn leads to knowledge gain (Tan, 1980) and voting intent (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001).

Social cognitive theory posits that one's involvement with a subject grows over time through positive personal experiences, as one increases self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Increases in self-efficacy further facilitate cognitive involvement and behaviors that seek to fulfill one's interest in a subject (Bandura, 1997). In this respect, situational involvement, self-efficacy, and media use are cosupportive constructs. Accordingly, citizens high in political self-efficacy report high cognitive involvement

with politics (Austin et al., 2008; Pinkleton & Austin, 1998, 2001). Prior studies have examined the link between traditional news media and these decision-making variables (Austin et al., 2008; Pinkleton & Austin, 1998, 2001) paving the way for exploration into whether emergent social media platforms similarly impact political decision making.

### TYPES OF ONLINE POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Existing scholarship differentiates political Internet activity into two forms (Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Wang 2007). The first political activity focuses on information-seeking behaviors in which the individual gathers information by attending to Internet sources. The second political activity focuses on a more active process in which the individual interacts with others or participates in online communities. This act is conceptually different from the cognitive process of information gathering. Katz et al. (2001) termed this active behavior “interaction” such as e-mail exchange with fellow citizens or government officials and participation in online discussions. Shah et al. (2005) termed such behaviors “interactive civic messaging,” consisting of interaction through e-mail. Wang’s (2007) factor analysis supported these conceptual distinctions, demonstrating a two-factor model of political Internet use: information seeking and opinion expression.

To contribute to the existing literature on political Internet activity in the new media age, the present study delineates online information-seeking behavior into two components: traditional Internet sources and information sources that constitute the realm of social media (Correa, Hinsley, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010). Specifically, the present study conceptually differentiates these components along the boundary of the main content creator. Traditional Internet sources rely predominantly on paid professionals, whereas social media rely primarily on interaction among users. To be sure, the news media and candidates publish content in the blog format and use social media tools to disseminate information or interact with the public. However, these are institutionalized communication acts in which the content producer is separate from the consumer to whom content is distributed (Bruns, 2006). Conversely, social media rely on what Bruns (2006) terms *produsage*, an organic production model in which boundaries between producer and consumer are eliminated such that users create the content for each other. Such communities rely on user collaboration and an ethic of openly sharing user creations (Bruns, 2006; Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006).

### The Internet and Politics

During its history, the Internet has developed into a key political information source. Between 1996 and 2008, the percentage of Americans who got political information online rose from 4% to 40% (Rainie, 2007a; Smith & Rainie, 2008). Reliance on the Internet for public affairs content has always been popular among young adults, with 37% of political Internet use in 1996 by persons younger than 30 (Rainie, 2007a).

Between the 2000 and 2006 election cycles, a number of online information sources witnessed significant growth in use such as traditional news organization Web sites, candidate Web sites, state and local government Web sites, and online news portals such as AOL and Yahoo! (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005; Rainie & Horrigan, 2007). They represent established political information sources that received significant portions of the online political news traffic in the elections leading up to the 2008 election cycle (Kohut, 2008).

### Social Media and Politics

The growth of online political behavior has been facilitated partly by the recent emergence of new interactive, media-rich Web sites. These Web sites, often referred to as social media, exist under the conceptual umbrella of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 Internet networks are valued in proportion to their capacity to harness the participation of online communities in the production, amalgamation, and exchange of information (O'Reilly, 2005).

Scholarship investigating social media has tended to focus predominantly on social network sites, community sites such as Facebook and MySpace that allow users to create profiles and establish connections with friends and acquaintances on the Internet (e.g., Ancu & Cozma, 2009; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Hayes, 2008; Williams & Gulati, 2007). Social network sites are a popular form of social media, whereas other formats such as blogs, microblogs, and video-sharing sites, among others, are also characterized by Web 2.0 elements. Microblogs such as Twitter allow users to post short messages that are published online in real time. Video-sharing sites such as YouTube enable users to share user-created video and interact with other users in an online community. A broader and more inclusive definition of social media is thus needed for researchers seeking to study these new media forms. For example, Correa et al. (2010) broadened this definition by adding instant messaging, a tool that enables social interaction. Scholars have also folded blogs into the social media umbrella given their function as "personal publication tools" (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009, p. 566) and their ability to foster interaction (Meraz, 2009). An underlying commonality is the

user-generated element characterized by openness and collaboration (Bruns, 2006; Leung, 2009; Nyland, Marvez, & Beck, 2007).

As political communication sources, social media are a recent phenomenon. Nearly all major party candidates used social media during the 2008 campaign (Hayes, 2008), with some beginning their use in the 2006 midterm election (Gueorguieva, 2008). Attention to social media for campaign information was significant during the 2008 campaign, particularly among young adults (Kohut, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008). For example, 27% of adults younger than 30 reported obtaining campaign information from social network sites compared to 4% of adults age 30 to 39 and only 1% older than 40 (Kohut, 2008).

### Online Expression and Politics

Online expression is functionally distinct from simply consuming content online (Katz et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2005; Wang, 2007). Online opinion expression and exchange have grown significantly in recent years. A recent survey indicates 15% of Americans used the Internet at least once a week during the 2008 election to urge others to support a candidate, and 10% made an online donation to a candidate or campaign (Smith & Rainie, 2008). In 2008, persons younger than 30 led the way, many of whom used the Internet to exchange political opinions and post their own political commentary (Kohut, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008).

Social media allow users to not only seek information but also interact with others through online expression such as posting political commentaries on blogs and social network sites and sharing multimedia commentary. Social software is about the collective and is organized around human interaction (boyd, 2007). For example, Facebook users could express themselves politically in various ways such as by making online donations, encouraging their friends to vote, and posting graphics or status updates expressing political attitudes and opinions. Twitter and blogs were used by candidates and voters alike to comment on social and political issues, share information, and encourage participation. YouTube and CNN teamed up to sponsor a debate in which candidates took questions from user-created video as opposed to a moderator, further encouraging the emergent phenomenon of user-generated political video expressions.

## POLITICAL DECISION MAKING AND THE INTERNET

There are two competing perspectives of the roles of the Internet in democracy. Some consider the Internet a democratizing medium, as it can increase

information access and allow citizens to voice and exchange their opinions (Morris, 1999). From this perspective, the Internet brings more citizens into the political process and may be particularly effective at engaging young people (Delli Carpini, 2000). Others are less optimistic about such potential and caution against the so-called democratization myth (McChesney, 2000; Sunstein, 2001).

Existing empirical evidence indicates that Internet use is positively associated with political outcomes including situational political involvement, political efficacy, knowledge, and participation (e.g., Austin et al., 2008; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Tedesco, 2007; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Following past research, traditional Internet use for campaign information is expected to be positively related to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement.

The positive relationship between Internet use and political self-efficacy and situational political involvement may translate to social media. Past studies have reported that political use of social network sites and blogs is positively related to political efficacy, political participation, and online political behaviors such as online political discussion and online participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Kim & Geidner, 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Attention to social media would be positively associated with political self-efficacy, because use of media-rich social media applications for political information such as microblog updates and streaming live video of campaign events would give users the perception of increased engagement with preferred candidates or parties.

Attention to social media would also be positively associated with situational political involvement, because social media offer users new channels for political information. Young adults rely heavily on friends and the Internet for political information (Wells & Dudash, 2007). Rather than merely receiving political information from traditional news media sources, users can experience politics on a more familiar, personal level through the postings of friends and acquaintances. Such experiences would make politics more accessible, bringing it into the daily lives of young adults and affecting their interest in political situations. Moreover, as social media consist primarily of user-generated content, users may be able to encounter ideas and opinions not well represented in traditional news media (Gillmor, 2006), which likely increases their interest in further information seeking.

It is also likely that online expression is positively related to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement, because of its interactive features such as interactive civic messaging and online discussion

(Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, & Dunsmore, 2005; Shah et al., 2005). Social media create venues where users can express political views and interact with others. Political use of interactive Internet features has been shown to have a greater impact on gains in political information efficacy for young adults than simple unidirectional Internet content (Tedesco, 2007).<sup>2</sup> This suggests that “accomplishing interactivity on a Web site offers youth a means to engage democracy” (Tedesco, 2007, p. 1191).

Further, interactivity is seen favorably for its ability to afford greater control over information seeking (Stromer-Galley & Foot, 2002). Conversation is perceived as a valuable source of political information for the involved voter (Pinkleton, 1999). Prior research has shown that the perceived importance of conversation for obtaining campaign information predicts situational political involvement (Austin & Pinkleton, 1999). This link would extend to social media, because users can engage in political expression beyond time and space and thus have increased capacity to seek further information.

Based on the literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1a: Attention to social media for campaign information will be positively associated with political self-efficacy.
- H1b: Online expression about the campaign will be positively associated with political self-efficacy.
- H1c: Attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information will be positively associated with political self-efficacy.
- H2a: Attention to social media for campaign information will be positively associated with situational political involvement.
- H2b: Online expression about the campaign will be positively associated with situational political involvement.
- H2c: Attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information will be positively associated with situational political involvement.

## METHOD

During the 2 weeks prior to the November 4, 2008, election, researchers conducted an online survey of college students at a large public

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<sup>2</sup>Political information efficacy is a type of political efficacy that concerns specifically the “voter’s confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage in the political process” (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007, p. 1096). Although it is a specific type of efficacy focused on information, it fits under the conceptual definition used in this study: an individual’s belief that through their efforts they can impact political processes (Tan, 1980).

university in the Northwest. As the focus of this study is on young adults' use of social media, college students are considered an appropriate population. College students are known to be among the most Internet-connected subgroups of the population and frequent users of e-mail (Jones, 2002). Every student enrolled at the university under study had a university-assigned e-mail address. A probability-based sample of the student body was obtained via the university registrar. An invitation e-mail was sent to the e-mail address of each individual in the sample. A follow-up e-mail reminder was sent during the week before the election. The survey completion rate was 10.85%. Although this response rate is admittedly low, it is consistent with the trend of e-mail solicitation survey research (Sheehan, 2001). Two respondents, who were not 18 years old or older, were directed to the end of the survey, as they were unable to participate. Respondents who were nontraditional students and were older than 29 were removed because this study focused on young adults. Twenty-five respondents were removed for this reason, which accounted for 5.8% of the sample. The resulting sample size was 407.

### Measures

Participants completed Likert-style scale items. The measures of political self-efficacy and situational political involvement were derived from past research (Austin et al., 2008; Pinkleton & Austin, 1998, 2001, 2004; Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002). Using the conceptual framework previously discussed as a guide, this study examines three forms of online political activity: attention to social media for campaign information, online expression about the campaign, and attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information. The measures of social media attention and online expression were based on popular and emerging social media platforms that served as political information traffic leading up to the 2008 campaign (Gueorguieva, 2008; Kohut, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008). The measures of traditional Internet sources were designed to capture established online sources of political information (Rainie et al., 2005; Rainie & Horrigan, 2007). Attention measures were used to assess the information-seeking dimension because they capture cognitive engagement with an information source, a level of cognitive expenditure not accounted for by the passive measure of exposure to, or encounter with, information (Chaffee & Schleuder, 1986).

A principal component analysis of 15 political Internet use items was conducted using direct oblimin rotation, as it was expected that political

Internet use is multidimensional and its dimensions are not orthogonal.<sup>3</sup> Based on the conceptual framework, a prior criterion of a three-factor solution was specified for extraction. A primary factor loading of .50 was used as a guide for determining the minimum primary loading of an item (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998), and an item that loaded at .32 or higher on two or more components was considered problematic (Costello & Osborne, 2005). A three-factor solution explained 52.4% of the variance, with the three components explaining 31.47%, 12.09%, and 8.84% of the variance, respectively.

The items that were expected to load respectively on attention to social media, attention to traditional Internet sources, and online expression were indeed observed to load on each underlying component. Five of the items loaded together on the first component: personal blogs; video-sharing Web sites; microblogs; social networking Web sites; and online forums and discussion boards. These items were combined to form an *attention to social media* index ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

Five indicators loaded together on the second component: government Web sites; candidate's Web sites; network TV news Web sites; print media news Web sites; and news pages of Internet service providers. These items were combined into an *attention to traditional Internet sources* index ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

The final items loaded together on the third component, with the exception of participation in online discussion. The participation in online discussion item loaded moderately high on both the first and third components. Therefore, it was excluded from subsequent analysis. The remaining items were writing blog posts on political issues; creating and posting online audio, video, animation, photos, or computer artwork to

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<sup>3</sup>Using a 7-point Likert-type scale with *no attention* and *a lot of attention* as anchors, respondents were asked, "For information about the election, how much attention have you been paying to each of the following?": (1) "Personal blogs," (2) "Video-sharing websites (YouTube)," (3) "Microblogs," (4) "Social networking Web sites (e.g., Facebook or MySpace)," (5) "Online forums and discussion boards," (6) "Government Web sites (e.g., local, state, or national)," (7) "Candidate's Web sites," (8) "Network TV news Web sites (e.g., CNN.com, ABCnews.com, or MSNBC.com)," (9) "Print media news Web sites (e.g., *New York Times* or *US News and World Report* Web sites)," and (10) "News pages of Internet service providers (e.g., Google News or Yahoo! News)." Using a 7-point Likert-type scale with *none* and *a lot* as anchors, respondents were also asked, "In regard to the election, how much have you engaged in each of the following?": (11) "Writing blog posts on political issues," (12) "Creating and posting online audio, video, animation, photos or computer artwork to express political views," (13) "Sharing political news, video clips, or others' blog posts online," (14) "Participating in online political discussions (e.g., Discussion boards and chat rooms), and (15) "Exchanging opinions about politics via e-mail, social networking Web sites, microblogging (such as Twitter) or instant messenger."

express political views; sharing political news, video clips, or others' blog posts online; and exchanging opinions about politics via e-mail, social networking Web sites, microblogging, or instant messenger. The *online expression* index, hence, consists of the four items ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

**Political self-efficacy.** Political self-efficacy was measured by four items using a 7-point Likert-type scale with *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* as anchors. Respondents were asked, "Please indicate whether you strongly disagree or strongly agree with each of the following statements": (1) "My vote makes a difference," (2) "I have a real say in what the government does," (3) "I can make a difference if I participate in the election process," and (4) "Voting gives people an effective way to influence what the government does." These items were combined into an additive index ( $\alpha = .89$ ), with a higher score indicating higher political self-efficacy.

**Situational political involvement.** Situational political involvement was measured by four items using a 7-point Likert-type scale with *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* as anchors. Respondents were asked, "Please indicate whether you strongly disagree or strongly agree with each of the following statements": (1) "I pay attention to election information," (2) "I like to stay informed about the elections," (3) "I'm interested in election information, and (4) "I actively seek out information concerning the elections." These items were summed into an additive index ( $\alpha = .89$ ), with a higher score indicating higher situational political involvement.

To examine the unique influence of the three online media variables, several variables were used as controls including age, sex, political ideology, and traditional news media use (i.e., newspapers, television, magazine, and radio). Sex was coded with women as the high value (53.3%). Due to the overwhelming percentage of respondents who identified as White (88.2%), race was not included in the present analysis (see Table 2). Although the majority of the respondents were White, these statistics do not differ significantly from the student population at the university used in the survey. Household income also was not used in the analysis, as a large number of respondents opted out of answering this question, which may have been a result of confusion, as many college students remain dependent on their parents' income and thus may not have found this question applicable. Not using these variables is consistent with previous research which has examined the political lives of young adults (Kaid et al., 2007). Traditional news media variables were measured by asking respondents, on a 7-point scale, how much attention they paid to each of the following for information about the election: newspapers, network television news, magazines, and radio.

TABLE 1  
An Analysis of Types of Political Internet Activity

	<i>Attention to social media</i>	<i>Attention to traditional internet sources</i>	<i>Online expression</i>
Microblogs	<b>.771</b>	-.116	-.099
Personal blogs	<b>.764</b>	-.097	-.083
Video-sharing Web sites	<b>.710</b>	.082	.169
Online forums and discussion boards	<b>.673</b>	-.192	.019
Social networking Web sites	<b>.637</b>	.067	.153
TV news Web sites	.120	<b>.700</b>	-.272
Print media news Web sites	.040	<b>.678</b>	-.041
News pages of Internet service providers	.106	<b>.663</b>	.136
Candidate's Web sites	-.079	<b>.549</b>	-.268
Government Web sites	-.139	<b>.513</b>	-.272
Creating and posting online audio, animation, photos, or computer artwork to express political views	-.175	.076	-. <b>812</b>
Writing blog posts on political issues	.126	.023	-. <b>681</b>
Sharing political news, video clips, or others' blog posts online	.305	-.008	-. <b>612</b>
Participating in online political discussions	.403	-.133	-.569
Exchanging opinions via e-mail, social networking sites	.209	.143	-. <b>534</b>

Note. Bold text indicates significant factor loadings.

TABLE 2  
Sample Demographics

	<i>M or % (N)</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender		
Male	44.2% (180)	
Female	53.3% (221)	
Age	21.5	2.65
Ethnicity <sup>a</sup>		
White	88.2% (359)	
African American	2.9% (12)	
Hispanic	3.4% (14)	
Asian American	7.1% (29)	
Native American	3.2% (13)	
Other	6.4% (26)	
Stance on political spectrum <sup>b</sup>	3.27	1.1

Note. N = 407.

<sup>a</sup>Category sums to greater than 100% because respondents of mixed ethnic background were able to select multiple criteria for ethnicity.

<sup>b</sup>1 = Very Conservative, 5 = Very Liberal.

To test the hypotheses, two regression models were constructed predicting political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. To counteract specification error and therefore inaccurate coefficient estimates, control variables were entered in the first block, followed by attention to social media, online expression, and attention to traditional Internet sources in the second block.

## RESULTS

Table 3 shows a regression model predicting political self-efficacy. Sex ( $\beta = .13$ ) was a significant predictor, with female respondents more politically efficacious. Radio news attention ( $\beta = .11$ ) was a significant predictor, with respondents who attended more to radio election news being more politically efficacious. The other news attention variables—newspapers, TV news, and magazines—were not significantly related to political self-efficacy. These variables accounted for 9.6% of the variance in political self-efficacy.

The first set of hypotheses stated that attention to social media, online expression, and attention to traditional Internet sources would be positively associated with political self-efficacy. H1a and H1b were not supported, as

TABLE 3  
Predicting Political Self-efficacy and Situational Political Involvement

	<i>Political self-efficacy</i> $\beta$	<i>Situational political involvement</i> $\beta$
Age	-.04	.11*
Sex (female)	.13**	-.06
Political ideology	-.01	-.02
Newspaper attention	-.04	.12*
TV news attention	.10	.08
Radio attention	.11*	.04
Magazine attention	-.03	-.14**
$R^2$ (%)	9.6***	12.9***
Attention to social media	.06	-.00
Online expression	.08	.16**
Attention to traditional Internet sources	.33***	.38***
Block $R^2$ (%)	11.1***	15.7***
Total $R^2$ (%)	20.6***	28.6***

Note. Cell entries are final standardized regression coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

attention to social media and online expression were not significantly related to political self-efficacy. Attention to traditional Internet sources was positively related to political self-efficacy ( $\beta = .33$ ), indicating that above and beyond all other variables, respondents who paid greater attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information were more politically efficacious than those who paid less attention. This lends support to H1c. The three online media variables as a whole explained 11.1% of the total variance.

Table 3 also presents a regression model predicting situational political involvement. Age ( $\beta = .11$ ) was positively associated with situational political involvement, with older respondents being more involved in the election. Newspaper attention ( $\beta = .12$ ) was a significant predictor of situational political involvement, with those with greater attention to newspapers for campaign information being more involved in the election. Magazine attention ( $\beta = -.14$ ) was negatively associated with situational political involvement. These variables accounted for 12.9% of the variance.

The second set of hypotheses predicted that attention to social media, online expression, and attention to traditional Internet sources would be positively associated with situational political involvement. H2a was not supported, as attention to social media was not significantly related to situational political involvement. H2b and H2c were supported. Online expression and attention to traditional Internet sources were significant predictors of situational political involvement ( $\beta = .16$  and  $\beta = .38$ , respectively). That is, respondents who frequently expressed opinions about the election online and those who paid greater attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information were respectively more involved in the election. The three online media variables explained 15.7% of the total variance.

## DISCUSSION

### Traditional Internet Sources

Scholars have argued that the Internet is a democratizing medium for its capacity to provide increased access to information and interaction, bringing individuals into the political process (Delli Carpini, 2000; Morris, 1999). A competing perspective suggests the Internet is a polarizing medium that allows like-minded individuals to share and reinforce their preexisting political beliefs (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Sunstein, 2001). Our results support the former. The results are consistent with prior research that has shown the positive effects of the Internet on democracy (e.g., Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Tedesco, 2007).

The present analysis showed a moderate link between attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information and political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. Consistent with past survey reports (Kohut, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008), this finding suggests that the Internet is an important political information source for young adults. Of importance, attention to radio was the only significant predictor of political self-efficacy, and attention to newspapers was the only significant predictor of situational political involvement. These results may suggest that traditional news media are becoming less important in the political lives of young adults. Alternatively, young adults may be moving to online editions of traditional news media including portal Web sites such as Yahoo! and MSN that cull stories from them. When considered in this way, traditional news media are not necessarily becoming less important for young adults. Rather, young adults may be using traditional news media information in online spaces. This may explain why attention to traditional Internet sources for campaign information was positively associated with political self-efficacy and situational political involvement, whereas most of the traditional news media variables were not.

Of interest, attention to social media, online expression, and attention to traditional Internet sources, as a whole, accounted for more variance in political self-efficacy and situational political involvement than demographic variables, political ideology, and traditional news media variables combined. In both cases, the new media variables accounted for more than 10% of the variance. These results also can be seen as a reflection of the prominence that Internet media have in the political lives of young adults.

### Social Media

Attention to social media was expected to be positively related to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement as media-rich interaction between citizens and political actors on social media afford users the perception of increased engagement with the campaign. Also, social media allow users to experience politics at a more intimate interpersonal level and obtain user-generated political information they might not be able to obtain in traditional news sources. Indeed, young adults used social media sites like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to get political content and commentary from other members of the social media community as well as to get information from news sources and campaigns.

Our results did not support this reasoning. Attention to social media for campaign information was not significantly associated with political self-efficacy and situational political involvement. The nature of social media might be related to these nonsignificant effects. The relative newness

of social media might have inhibited any effect on political self-efficacy and situational political involvement in the 2008 election. As can be suggested from a prior report (Smith & Rainie, 2008), users might not have been knowledgeable about social media platforms from which they could acquire accurate political information.

Although consumption of political information on social media may help cultivate the perception of increased engagement with political systems, certain types of content may inhibit this capacity. For example, political content with strong partisan or cynical messages from peers may act to offset its potentially beneficial effects on political self-efficacy, as a recent report shows that those who obtain news online tend to prefer nonpartisan sources (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel, & Olmstead, 2010). It is also possible that some content seeking to persuade users to be more involved in the election interfered with the ability of social media to cultivate a positive sense of engagement with politics. Some might have perceived such messages as meddling, whereas others might have perceived that they were less politically prepared than their peers. Thus, it is likely that political content on social media plays the paradoxical role of exposing individuals to greater content while insulating them from gains in political self-efficacy.

*The Pew Internet and American Life Project* reported that many young adults do not actively search for political information but rather encounter such information while going online for other purposes (Kohut, 2008). Such unintended encounters can occur frequently in social media (Utz, 2009). Facebook and Twitter, for example, deliver a stream of status updates by other users they friend or follow. These services push content to the user with limited active information seeking. If attention to social media for political information is not as purposive as some might expect, the unintended receiving of political content may not serve to activate users' motivation to seek out information. In a related vein, the social media formats that present a wide variety of information simultaneously may distract users' attention and impair their capacity to extract politically efficacious information and seek out additional political information.

The present study contributes to a growing body of evidence that may lead scholars to question the political utility of social media (e.g., Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). Despite the positive outlook expressed in political and social arenas, the information-seeking dimension of social media did not appear to play a major role in the 2008 election as it was not related to political self-efficacy and situational political involvement, important predictors of political participation (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Pinkleton et al., 1998).

### Online Expression

Social media such as Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and YouTube offer young adults opportunities for written and multimedia political expression and interaction with others. Such interactive features of social media were expected to be related to an increased sense of political engagement and motivation to seek out information about the election. Our results showed that online expression was significantly related to situational political involvement but not political self-efficacy. This indicates that a desire to express what one has learned is connected to a desire to learn about the election. As young adults go online to express opinions, discuss issues, or share information, they become more cognitively involved in the election. This is consistent with prior studies reporting the positive effects of online political discussion in democracy (e.g., Hardy & Scheufele, 2005) and extends previous research reporting the link between perceived importance of political conversations and situational political involvement (Austin & Pinkleton, 1999).

The reasons for the nonsignificant relationship between online expression and political self-efficacy are not entirely clear. It might be that political information individuals obtain through online interaction lacks perceived credibility. As online political discourses often contain uncivil elements (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998), online political communication might not always be pleasant and efficacious. Further, the extent to which online content generation is gratifying is an important variable in determining its impact on general self-efficacy (Leung, 2009). The link between online expression and political self-efficacy, if any, might depend on the nature of interaction, quality of information, and extent to which it is gratifying, rather than the expression act itself. It is also important to point out that the present study examined only the effects of online expression on political self-efficacy. It is possible that the two are related in a reverse order, with those who are political efficacious more likely to engage in online expression than their counterparts.

### LIMITATIONS

The present study is limited in several key respects. First, social media are constantly evolving, and the boundaries between the cognitive and behavioral aspects as well as those between social media and traditional Internet sources may become less distinct as new applications are developed and implemented. Therefore, future studies should continue to explore the dimensionality of political Internet use.

The findings must be interpreted with caution, as they are based on a college student sample and hence not generalizable to young adults in the United States. Also, the survey response rate was unfavorably low. Although the demographics of respondents were similar to the population parameters of the university, this might have produced biased estimates. The reasons for the low response rate are not entirely clear. Respondents were contacted twice, initially and right before the election, to increase the response rate for the Web survey (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004; Manfreda & Vehovar, 2008). It might be due to other sources of survey nonresponse such as the use of incentives and the timing of the follow-up contact (Lynn, 2008; Manfreda & Vehovar, 2008). At any rate, due to this limitation, the present findings should not be considered as conclusive.

Third, political involvement can be viewed as consisting of cognitive and behavioral aspects. The present study assessed a cognitive aspect of political involvement conceived as the motivation of the individual to seek out information about the election. Future research should test whether social media play a role in affecting behavioral aspects of involvement such as political participation and voting.

Finally, the present study does not draw any causal inferences about the relationships between political Internet use and political decision making because of the nature of the analysis. Longitudinal data of young adults' social media use would allow for better assessments of the political utility of online media.

## CONCLUSION

These limitations and considerations notwithstanding, this study has extended prior research by offering an expanded conception of social media and by differentiating and comparing the cognitive and behavioral dimensions with traditional Internet sources. Despite popular discussion about social media as political forces in the 2008 election, traditional Internet sources played a greater role in affecting political self-efficacy and situational political involvement for the present sample.

This, of course, does not mean that social media will not play any important role in young adults' political lives. It enables various forms of interaction with fellow citizens and political actors that were not possible prior to its growth. User-generated content can provide meaningful information that citizens might not be able to acquire elsewhere. Also, its open and collaborative nature can lower the barriers of entry into politics, particularly for less politically sophisticated groups. It must be noted, however, that social

media alone would not have profound and lasting effects on young adults' political decision making. It is ultimately a platform supported by users' active participation in content creation. It is thus important to educate and socialize young adults toward the political use of social media. Such socialization may increase motivated use of social media for political purposes and lead to the realization of its political benefits.

It took multiple election cycles for the public to adopt the Internet as a political information source. The same pattern of growth may be observed for social media. As can be suggested by diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 1995), social media are characterized by their relative advantages for political actors and citizens. Moreover, the open and participatory nature is compatible with fundamental democratic values. As the social system recognizes the utility of social media for political communication and young adults become more familiar and comfortable with using social media for political purposes, social media may become part of their political information repertoire. Research on social media is a growing line of inquiry. Further examination is required to better understand their impacts on political decision making as they develop and become more widely adopted.

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## APPENDIX

### Measures and Indexes

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Cronbach's α</i>
Political self-efficacy	18.56	5.67	.89
Situational political involvement	22.78	4.66	.89
Newspaper attention	4.63	1.83	
TV news attention	4.51	1.90	
Radio attention	3.13	2.06	
Magazine attention	2.89	1.87	
Attention to social media	10.74	6.09	.78
Attention to traditional Internet sources	19.70	6.53	.66
Online expression	7.79	5.03	.75