

Talking Politics and Snowballing Values: How Online Journalism Connects Innovation with the Political Process in Consolidating Democracies

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Abstract

The present study explores how online journalism connects innovation with the political process in consolidating democracies by investigating the case of South Korea, an emerging society and leading IT country. Focus is given to the two aspects of innovation journalism, which are online deliberation and cyberculture of postmaterialism. This paper attempts a theoretical speculation of this value-seeking political participation in order to respond to the question of how innovation renders political value drive citizen participation in public life.

1 Introduction

As the news environment rapidly shifted due to the birth of the Internet, the manner of news presentation and consumption is accordingly changing towards a more likely interactive format. Rather than the role of journalists and that of news consumers are distinctively separated, they mutually interact in the way to revitalize civic life. In this environment, therefore, civic participation emerges to be critical to advance democratic development in emerging societies. A question then arises concerning how online journalism facilitates the influence of innovation communication system on civic engagement in the political process. A widely-accepted belief is that there are three factors driving electoral behavior and political decision making of individuals: self-interest, value, and prior experience. This study proposes that online media and the changing journalistic environment illuminate political value as a core factor that drives citizen participation in public life. Although it is common assumption that self-interest, more than anything else, significantly matters for people in the countries which historically experienced economic hardship, value-driven political participation is frequently observed in Korea with the development of online news environment. Based on the foregoing speculation, two aspects of online journalism rendering value a primary motivational force for the political process have been gauged: online deliberation and cyberculture of postmaterialism.

2 Value-seeking political participation

Modes of political participation have taken different forms over time. This is partly because communications technologies have shifted according to

how the political world is working. While ancient politics has in significant part taken place in Agora, modern and contemporary politics cannot operate without the mediation of communications technologies. Although there have been competing views regarding the causal relationship between the media and political development (i.e. which is a cause and which is an effect), in any event, it is hardly disputed that communications technology has exerted a formidable influence on the unfolding of politics throughout human history.¹

2.1 The Impact of the Internet

Admittedly, it is the print media that were the first to re-shape the patterns of political behavior in ways that created large-scale communications. Afterwards, television substituted the role played by its predecessor, giving rise to even further significant changes on the political scene.² Conceivably, the revolutionary impact of communications technologies finally reached its peak with the birth of new communications technologies – particularly the Internet and its applications. Political institutions adopt new communications technologies in their workings, and a prominent example is shown by election campaigns. Election campaigning has been significantly influenced by technological development such that the patterns and styles of campaigning have undergone distinctive shifts according to which type of communications technologies is a primary means of campaign strategies (i.e. television versus telecommunications).³

The significant impact of the new media is not limited to formal political institutions such as government and parties; they have also facilitated unconventional modes of political activities including protest politics. The implications of the new media – particularly those of the Internet – could be even more significant for civil society groups given that cost-effective

¹ Neuman, W. Russell. 1991. *The Future of the Mass Audience*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

² McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding Media*. New York: American Library.

³ Farrell, David M. 1996. 'Campaign Strategies and Tactics', in Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi, and Pippa Norris (eds.), *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective* (pp. 160-183). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

methods for grassroots mobilization are provided by these new vehicles.⁴ Studies show that web-based ICT applications have become an effective means of politicizing political movement participants, enabling them to diversify their action repertoires.⁵

Regarding the relationship between the media in general and political participation, there is a large literature that provides evidence of the positive impact of the media on citizen engagement in political processes. The media increase political awareness and political knowledge, and such high political sophistication results in more active engagement in the political process.⁶ More specifically, the media promote political participation by influencing two important factors: resources and motivation.⁷ Participation in political activities requires civic skills to cope with the political world. Political action is, in general, an outcome of a complex mental calculation of multiple facets of politics, such as the evaluation of political performance, expectations of political prospects, and the personal relevance of political issues. The media contribute to the facilitation of political participation by enhancing those political skills and mobilizing political resources.⁸ Along the same lines, motivational factors such as political interest and efficacy, values, and affect, are the other ingredients of political participation, which are influenced by the media.

⁴ Norris, Pippa. 2001. *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Zelwietro, J. 1998. 'The Politicization of Environmental Organizations through the Internet', *Information Society*, 14(1): 45-55.

⁶ McLeod, Jack M. and McDonald, Daniel G. 1985. 'Beyond Simple Exposure: Media Orientations and Their Impacts on Political Processes', *Communication Research*, 12:3-19; Scheufele, Dietram A., Shanahan, James, and Kim, Sei-Hill. 2002. 'Who Cares about Local Politics? Media Influences on Local Political Involvement, Issue Awareness, and Attitude Strength', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(2):427-444; Stamm, Keith R., Emig, Arthur G., and Hesse, Michael B. 1997. 'The Contribution of Local Media to Community Involvement', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74:97-107.

⁷ Norris, Pippa. 2002a. *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Conway, M. M. 1991. *Political Participation in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press; Milbrath, Lester W. and Goel, M. L. 1977. *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved?* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: Rand McNally; Rosenstone, Steven J. and Hansen, John Mark. 1993. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan; Verba, Sidney, Scholzman, Kay L., and Brady, Henry E. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

However, there have been counter-arguments to the suggestion that the media have positive impacts on political participation, and some studies actually argue that the mass media erode citizens' political participation.⁹ Still, others suggest that differential effects on political participation are observed according to the types of mass media that are involved¹⁰ or the kinds of TV programs being watched, such that, for instance, the viewing of commercial and entertainment programs leads to disengagement from civic activities.¹¹ The suggestion that campaign effects, of which a prominent source are the media, depend on a number of other mediating and moderating factors indicates that the impact of the media on political participation is also contingent upon such factors.

The contradictory views on the political consequences of the media in general are extended to the Internet as well, and two opposing positions have emerged regarding the political impact of the Internet: which might be called 'cyber-optimists' and 'cyber-pessimists'. Scholars in the first group contend that the Internet holds great promise for the future of participatory democracy by becoming an effective means of engaging people in the political arena. Bottom-up communication methods and real-time conversation over the Internet affords great opportunities for lay citizens to participate in the political process.¹² In effect, according to this view, empirical evidence suggests that Internet use significantly contributes to enhancing political interest and to increasing the likelihood of voting.¹³ In

⁹ Gans, Curtis. 1993. 'Television: Political Participation's Enemy #1', *Spectrum*, 66(2):26-30; Putnam, Robert D. 1995b. 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 28 (4): 664-683.

¹⁰ St. George, Arthur and Robinson-Weber, Sandra. 1983. 'The Mass Media, Political Attitudes, and Behavior', *Communication Research*, 10(4):487-508.

¹¹ Hooghe, Marc. 2002. 'Watching Television and Civic Engagement: Disentangling the Effects of Time, Programs, and Stations', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7(2):84-104.

¹² Coleman, S. and Gøtze, J. 2001. 'Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation', available at www.hansardsociety.org.uk; Dertouzos, Michael. 1997. *What Will Be: How the New World of Information Will Change Our Lives*. San Francisco, CA: Harper Edge; Morris, Merrill and Ogan, Christine. 1996. 'The Internet as a Mass Medium', *The Journal of Communication*, 46(1): 39-50; Negroponte, Nicholas. 1995. *Being Digital*. New York: Knopf.

¹³ Johnson, Thomas J. and Kaye, Barbara K. 2003. 'A Boost or Bust for Democracy? How the Web Influenced Political Attitudes and Behaviors in the 1996 and 2000 Presidential Elections', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 8(3):9-34.

contrast, cyber-pessimists argue that the impact of the Internet on political participation is limited; their view is that the Internet merely reinforces existing political orientations or even atrophies social and political engagement.¹⁴

2.2 Online Deliberation

One of the plausible solutions for these conflicting contentions would be concerned with the way people actually use the Internet. Since the medium is used in a variety of ways, its political impact might well differ depending on the modes of use. In particular, it would be worth focusing on the aspects of the Internet that distinguish the medium from the traditional media. It is widely accepted that the most distinctive features of the Internet are deliberative and communitarian functions. Online deliberation on issues of public interest enhances citizens' political qualities, which in turn facilitate engagement in the political process. In fact, by observing the inconclusive results regarding the media effects on political participation, scholars have started to note the factors that might mediate between the media and participation. One of the factors identified is political discussion with others. It has been found that deliberative practices increase the positive impact of the media on participation.¹⁵ At the same time, the networking mechanism of the Internet increases individual citizens' social capital, and some believe that this online social capital is an integral component of political participation.¹⁶ However, given that the political

¹⁴ Davis, Richard, and Owen, Diane. 1998. *New Media and American Politics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Kolko, Beth and Reid, Elizabeth. 1998. 'Dissolution and Fragmentation: Problems in On-line Communities', in Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. Sage Publications; Kamarck, Elaine Ciulla & Nye, Joseph S. (eds.) 1999. *Democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World*. Hollis, NH: Hollis Publishings; Margolis, Michael and Resnick, David. 2000. *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution"*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage publications; Scheufele, D. A. and Nisbet, M. C. 2002. 'Being a Citizen Online: New Opportunities and Dead Ends', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7(3): 55-75.

¹⁵ Scheufele, Dietram A. 2002. 'Examining Differential Gains from Mass Media and Their Implications for Participatory Behavior', *Communication Research*, 29(1):46-65.

¹⁶ Baym, Nancy K. 1995. 'The Emergence of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication', in Steven G. Jones (ed), *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*. Sage publications; Wuthnow, Robert. 1994. *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*. New York: Free Press.

consequences of social capital are obscure, the social capital function of the Internet might result in only a limited impact on political participation. In any event, the manner in which the Internet is used appears to be an important research agenda item to resolve conflicting views on its political influence.

2.3 Postmaterialist Value

Furthermore, what makes the Internet unique and distinguishes it from the traditional media is that it creates a specific culture that is shared by its users. It may be propelled by technical features such as personalized modes of Internet usage or by the predispositions of heavy Internet users, but regardless of this, it emerges as a distinctive political culture that leads to new modes of political behavior and action. This cyberculture is characterized by postmaterialist value orientations.¹⁷ Developed from materialism, postmaterialism emphasizes value shifts from the traditional world view. Instead of focusing on national security, economic growth and physical sustenance, it places a great deal of importance on a wide spectrum of values including individual freedom, self-actualization, and cosmopolitanism. Internet users are more likely to care about postmaterial values such as the quality of life and self-expression, than about materialistic concerns including economic development and national security.¹⁸ Given that empirical studies have demonstrated that postmaterialist value priorities are significantly related to participatory orientations, the cyberculture of postmaterialism seems to mediate between Internet use and political participation, which makes it an important aspect to consider in identifying the role of the Internet in political participation.

Value-sharing activities of citizens are forming cyberculture characterized by postmaterialist values. Online news media deals with a growing number of value-driven issues and events compared with the media of pre-Internet

¹⁷ Norris, Pippa. 2001. *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ Inglehart, Ronald. 1977. *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Inglehart, Ronald. 1990a. *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

era. Although it may sound more logical that materialistic needs dominate consolidating democracies and emerging societies given the economic hardship experienced in those countries, innovation journalism contributes to make postmaterialistic values a primary concern for the people in those societies. As such, innovation journalism is at the intersection of the two dimensions of the Internet – the behavioral dimension, which is the manner in which it is used (i.e. online deliberation), and the cultural dimension (i.e. postmaterialist attitudes).

3 Discussion

A deliberative mode of news presentation in cyberspace enables news consumers to freely interact with journalists and fellow citizens to discuss public matters. Blogs and online cafés offered by both the traditional mainstream media and the alternative media are becoming virtual political agora of which citizen activities advance deliberative democracy and influence offline political scene. News is not a disposable product any longer, people ponder on the news to make a political decision, and values emerge as an important determinant of political actions. Online deliberation is a vibrant political activity in consolidating democracies, and communities spread all over cyberspace by sharing values one another.

The public's value-seeking activity has come to be an imperative element in the political process of consolidating democracies. The prevailing impact of online journalism on civic participation is that the significance of values outweighs the other two (i.e. self-interest and prior experience) due to its interactive news presentation mode and the public's responsive activities. In this article, the ever-increasing influence of values as a motivational force to drive individuals to participate in political activities is explained by the two aspects of how online journalism connects innovation with the political process: online deliberation, and cyberculture of postmaterialism. In short, the phenomena observed in daily life of online environment in Korea indicate that civic activities of 'talking politics' lead people to share important values with fellow citizens, eventually resulting in 'snowballing values.'

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