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## MEDIA AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

### On Understanding and Misunderstanding Communication Effects

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Inquiries into the health of civil society and engagement in public life have long rooted their accounts in citizens' personal traits and social standing (Almond & Verba, 1963; Habermas, 1979; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Tocqueville, 1835/1840; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). For many years, individuals' characteristics and connections were considered the keys to understanding differences in involvement in the public sphere, with age, gender, education, race, employment status, church attendance, residential stability, and general sociability the key factors explaining participation. More recently, scholars such as John Coleman (1990), Robert Putnam (1992), and Francis Fukuyama (1995) have theorized that these dispositional and situational factors may in fact be discrete indicators of latent constructs such as community integration, network membership, and a commitment to civic virtues and values (see Friedland, 2001; Friedland & Shah, 2005).

Much of the recent work on this topic has focused on explaining, implicitly or explicitly, the question of a four-decade decline in civic engagement and political participation that presumably threatens community life in America. Concern about the erosion of civil society, especially by communication scholars, is largely a response to Robert Putnam's (1995) "Bowling Alone" thesis, in which he contends that this loss of community solidarity, civic volunteerism, and political engagement is a result of the adverse effects of television viewing on *social capital*—i.e., "features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (1995, p. 664). According to this view, time spent with television privatizes leisure time and therefore displaces other activities that build

community. Further, as predicted by cultivation theory, the depiction of social reality on television is thought to cultivate a perception of the world as a "mean place," leading ultimately to social withdrawal (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; cf. Hawkins & Pingree, 1981). The limited empirical support that exists for these links is based on crude hours-of-use measures, which are used to draw conclusions about complex multi-channel environments (Putnam, 2000; cf. Norris, 1996).

Nonetheless, these arguments have been extended to the Internet, with research relating time spent on-line to the erosion of psychological well-being, social trust, real-world ties, and community involvement (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998). Despite their failure to consider how these complex media forms are used, critics of television and the Internet have had considerable sway over the thinking of others examining the effect of electronic media on civic life (see Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Nie, 2001).

Over a decade of research on these issues has done much to correct these mischaracterizations of media effects on civic life. Many of these emergent insights echo the conclusions of the sizable body of theory and inquiry stretching back over the last 80 years that links mass communication—typically the local newspaper—to community engagement (see Dewey, 1927; Pan & McLeod, 1991; Park, 1940; Stamm, 1985; Tönnies, 1940). This new wave of research has not only found that electronic media use can have positive effects on civic engagement, it has helped create a number of new arenas of inquiry, each one clarifying how mass media and civic life intersect. In this chapter, we classify this rapidly developing scholarship within five domains of research, each one representing a new direction for communication effects research:

1. usage patterns, attending to disaggregated media effects on civic life;
2. generational differences, especially issues of media and civic socialization;
3. Internet dynamics, including individual, social, and institutional influences;
4. communication mediation, particularly channeling of campaign and news effects;
5. geographic/cross-national contexts, focusing on multi-level models.

The sizable body of research that falls within these domains has helped establish communication processes as central to understanding the health of civil society. It has found that mass media can be agents of engagement alongside personal characteristics and social connections. In fact, the most advanced efforts have integrated individual, situational, and contextual factors into broader models that consider the causes and consequences of media use as it relates to participation. Before we consider these advances, the claim of civic decline is first reviewed.

### THE EROSION OF CIVIC LIFE

The thesis of an erosion in civic engagement and community health is intuitively appealing. The declaration of a decline resonates with older Americans, who often bemoan the loss of neighborliness and express concern about strains in the social fabric that binds citizens together. Available evidence suggests that by the end of the 20th century, face-to-face encounters with other community members had slid to a forty-year low. Measures of informal socializing indicate that people visit with friends, play cards, share meals, and go to bars at substantially lower levels than they did, on average, a generation ago. Americans seemingly are not as sociable as they once were.

At first glance, levels of volunteering and charitable contributions appear to buck this

trend; however, cohort analyses suggest that older people bear a disproportionate amount of the service and financial burden. And although attendance at public events has remained high, it cannot match the sharp rise in privatized entertainment, particularly with the rise of home theatres and digital media. Political participation has also declined, with fewer than half of Americans voting in many recent national elections, and reduced numbers working for campaigns and running for political office (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). It seems, then, that between 1960 and 2000, Americans went from being a nation of participants to a nation of observers, with those under 30 years of age the most detached from public life (Putnam, 1995, 2000).

Research on *social capital* links these indicators of community health at the aggregate and individual level by conceiving of civic and political participation as a "by-product of activities engaged in for other purposes" (Coleman, 1990, p. 312). As Inglehart (1997) found, spending time with friends and participating in community life may strengthen social networks and reinforce norms of reciprocity, thereby sustaining democratic values. That is, individuals who are connected and confident about the return of their social investments feel a greater sense of belonging to their communities and take a more active role in politics (Rahn, Brehm, & Carlson, 1999), a "virtuous circle" of trust and participation that allows citizens to act together in the pursuit of joint objectives. Thus, social capital contributes indirectly to participation because individuals engaged in social and civic life are especially likely to take an interest in the political process.

Trying to determine the causes of the decline in civic and political engagement over the last 40 years has been one of the central concerns of recent scholarly inquiry. Many possible suspects have been named: increasing time pressure, economic conditions, residential mobility, suburbanization, the breakdown of the family, the disillusionment with authority, the growth of the welfare state, generational change, the women's liberation movement and civil rights revolution, and, most infamously, the rise of television (Putnam, 2000). Most of these suspects have been exonerated due to their failure to explain the totality of the downward trend, which, of course, ignores the possibility that each one of these factors may have played an incremental role in the erosion of community life, incrementally chipping away at community integration.

Instead, Putnam (1995) initially pointed to television as the culprit. Aggregate level evidence shows that the number of hours Americans spend with television on a daily basis has increased during the period in question, placing the decline of social capital in step with the rise of television. Putnam also used individual-level data to demonstrate that even when controlling for education, income, age, race, place of residence, work status, and gender, television viewing is strongly, negatively associated with both civic engagement and interpersonal trust. The same relationships are positive for newspaper reading. Putnam pointed to this contrast as support for his conclusion that television is to blame for the erosion of social capital.

This general thesis has faced criticism on a number of fronts. Some have argued that the decline in indicators of civic life is actually a change in the form rather than the amount of participation. Ladd (1996), for one, argued that although fraternal organizations like the Kiwanis, Optimists, and Lions have seen a decline in membership, others have grown to take their places, especially environmental and religious groups. The health club and the coffee shop have replaced the bowling alley and the corner bar. Likewise, Bennett (1998) and Skocpol (2003) argued that new forms of citizen activities such as consumer movements, lifestyle politics, and socially conscious consumption have been growing, replacing traditional forms of civic participation. Nonetheless, it does appear the rates of engagement in public life—organizational membership, civic

participation, and political involvement—have not kept up with the increase in educational attainment over the past 50 years, which has risen sharply.

Yet this raises the question of whether it is appropriate to treat the early 1960s as a baseline simply because of the availability of data. This arbitrary starting point is perfect for framing a narrative of civic decline, even though prior eras have been characterized by downturns in civic activity (Schudson, 1998). Indeed, the introduction and rise of television, and its displacement of the newspaper as the dominant medium, may be indicative of a broader set of social changes that characterize the late 20th century, and may not be causally linked to the supposed decline. It could well be that both are the consequence of a period of unprecedented economic expansion and the culture of contentment that sprang up in the post-World War years, a period that hit its zenith in the early 1960s before the social upheavals of the late 1960s and beyond (Galbraith, 1992).

Even more troubling, this approach treats television—and, by extension, the Internet—as monolithic, reducible to the amount it is used, and capable only of direct effects. It pays little attention to the various ways a medium is consumed, the differential effects this may have, and the broader processes of which it is often a part. “Focusing on *hours of use* as opposed to *patterns of use*,” this thesis directed attention to “*how much*” individuals use a medium as opposed to “*how they use it*” (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001, p. 142, emphasis in original). Although the volume of use may be important, a failure to understand it within its social context leads to misunderstandings.

#### USAGE PATTERNS AND DISAGGREGATED EFFECTS

This inattention to the complexity of media uses and media effects was the focus of a considerable amount of the political communication research that initially responded to the thesis of television as culprit. Whereas the rise of television may be partly responsible for the decline in social capital, the simplification of such a diverse medium to volume of use is problematic. This point was made explicit through Norris's (1996) analysis of the American Citizen Participation Study (see Verba et al., 1995). She finds that in addition to the role of age and education in equations predicting various forms of activism, viewing informational programming contributes positively to participation, whereas total television viewing contributes negatively. This is largely consistent with research by McLeod and colleagues (McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), which has demonstrated that local news viewing functions much like newspaper reading when related to civic participation at the community level.

Along these same lines, Lee, Cappella, and Southwell (2003) analyzed four data sets to explain the other half of the virtuous circle of engagement and trust. They found that age, education, and newspaper readership are consistent and strong associates of interpersonal trust, but that these social attitudes have no relationship with heavier or lighter consumption of television, rejecting Putnam's (and Gerbner's) hypothesis of “mean world” effects (see also Uslaner, 1998). Other studies have examined the time displacement argument and concluded that amount of television viewing does not produce the outcomes predicted by Putnam (Moy, Scheufele, & Holbert, 1999).

Thus, it appears that individuals use the news information they acquire via broadcast or print to reflect and deliberate about local issues. These scholars argue that media do more than educate; they help individuals organize their thoughts about their “imagined

community” while also providing the basis for political discussion that can lead to civic action. We return to both of these points below when we consider the contextual effects of media and the idea of communication mediation. Despite their innovative nature, a number of these studies suffer from an important limitation: they only disaggregate one type of television use—news viewing—without considering the possibility that other television genres may have similar independent effects.

Shah's (1998) research addressed this issue while also examining the strength and direction of the relationships within the virtuous circle of participation and trust. He found that other types of television content also have the potential to provide information and foster reflection, the two presumed mechanisms to civic engagement. Analysis of DDB Life Style Study data revealed (a) that how individuals were using television (i.e., genre of viewing) was a more powerful predictor of trust and participation than volume of use (i.e., estimated hours of viewing) and (b) that some genres of use were positively related to civic participation and interpersonal trust (social dramas and situation comedies, respectively), whereas other forms were negatively related (e.g., science fiction viewing). These findings speak to the importance of disaggregating media use.

The positive relationship of drama and sitcom viewing with these outcomes is particularly relevant to the purposes of this chapter, because it suggests that entertainment programming may allow for complex and influential representations of the social and political “life-world.” These programs are emotionally engaging, base their truth claims on experiential knowledge, and treat the audience as being physically present within the situation. Even finer-grained distinctions within television “genres of representation” have found that watching particular types of social dramas and crime programs shapes political attitudes toward topics ranging from women's rights to gun ownership (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003, 2004). As Shah (1998) notes:

Television, it seems, is not the monolithic danger that some research on social capital might lead us to believe. Instead, the relationships between the use of television, civic engagement, and interpersonal trust must be viewed as more conditional—highly dependent on the type of programming one is considering and audience members' uses of it. How much television people watch appears to be less important than what they are watching. (p. 490)

This research, then, both reflects and complicates the distinctions suggested by theorizing on media uses and gratifications. Work in this area has tried to answer the question of why individuals choose to use particular types of media content and has discovered regular patterns of consumption that contrast *information and surveillance* motives for media use with the *entertainment and diversion* functions they serve (Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1987; Rosengren, Palmgren, & Wenner, 1985). Recent scholarship by Prior (2005, 2007) on whether people have a preference for news or entertainment echoes this perspective. He argued that we have entered a “post-broadcast” environment in which media consumers have more and more control over their mode and type of use. In such a context, individuals inclined to avoid the news can do so with ease, whereas those who choose to follow current events can do so 24 hours a day. From this perspective, engagement in public life becomes more unequal and more polarized.

However, this conclusion may be too stark. As noted above, recent inquiries have concluded that the pro-civic effects of media use are not restricted to reading newspapers, watching news programs, and consuming public affairs content over the Internet. Indeed, Baum (2002) has written persuasively that soft news consumption, a category

somewhere between news and entertainment, can have laudable effects on the citizenry, especially the politically inattentive (also Baum & Jamison, 2006). Content such as late night news satires such as *The Daily Show* and daytime talk shows such as *Oprah* allow viewers to gain knowledge about public affairs. Mobilizing information available in a wide range of media (e.g., rally information, relief donations) also facilitates civic involvement by making citizens aware of where and how to participate. Thus, the lines cannot be drawn so cleanly between news and entertainment when examining effects on civic life.

### GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES AND MEDIA SOCIALIZATION

The lack of clear distinctions between news and entertainment is particularly important to note when considering how patterns of media use vary across generational groups and the types of effects media have on socialization into public life. Generational differences and issues of political socialization have been central to the study of media and civic participation because the downward trend in core indicators of social capital appears to be both a cohort and life-cycle effect. That is, these changes appear to be based as much on differences between generational groups rooted in their formative experiences as they are on shifts that occur over the life-course. Said another way, the Baby Boomer parents of Generations X and Y are more participatory and trusting than their kids not only because they are older and more integrated into community life, but also because they were more participatory and trusting when they were young—a trait they carried with them as they aged. The same is true of the preceding “Civic Generation” relative to their Boomers progeny.

As a result, the gap in civic engagement and voting behavior between young and older adults has grown in recent years in most Western democracies, though there has been some recent reversal of this trend. Yet even when young people do vote, their action is not as likely to be accompanied by other public-spirited activities, at least those measured by conventional indicators. Youth are also less knowledgeable and politically attentive than their parents were at their age. There are substantial cohort differences in media use (Peiser, 2000), especially for newspapers and the Internet.

However, the differential influence of media on social capital production across generational groups may not simply reflect variation in levels in use; rather, age-cohort and life-cycle differences may be a function of media reliance—an affinity toward certain types of media as primary sources of gratification fulfillment (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; McLeod, Glynn, & McDonald, 1983). Directly relevant to this point, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001), in their investigation of civic participation, found that Generation X was most influenced by the Internet, Boomers by television, and the Civic Generation by newspapers. This suggests that different age cohorts tend to rely on the medium that they were socialized into using for information and surveillance during adolescence. Each generation has a preferred medium that accounts for much of its reserves of social capital. This reasoning fits with recent theorizing about political socialization, which has argued for attention to generational differences and life-long learning models (Sears & Levy, 2003).

This shift in attention to young adulthood and even later life stages increases the import of media in models of civic socialization because parental and educational influence is comparatively reduced after adolescence. Of course, in some formulations,

young adults, as heavy users of media, are thought to be most prone to the negative influences of television and the Internet. However, these assessments of adverse influence on participation have been called into question, as noted above. In their place, recent work has emerged that observes that news viewing, online news consumption, and other forms of media use have positive effects on youth engagement (Eveland, McLeod, & Horowitz, 1998; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001).

Consequently, conventional models of political socialization have been altered over the last 40 years to account for changing communication patterns. Some of these new models take into account that television viewers often combine watching with other activities. Given that youth typically spend seven hours a day using media—comparable to the time they spend in school or sleeping—models must consider that they are often using two or more media simultaneously (Roberts, 2000). Further, media use does not occur in isolation; the socializing influences of mass media on youth are often complemented and reinforced by communication with parents and peers (Chaffee, McLeod, & Wackman, 1973). In particular, children who are encouraged to openly express their ideas—even those at odds with parents—tend to be more politically engaged, whereas children who are raised in contexts where conformity is emphasized are less engaged. Similarly, political discussion with family, friends, and others in one’s social network has been found to help develop civic identity (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995).

To understand the effect of media use and political talk on adolescent socialization, we must consider both the *level* of activity and strength of *effect*. Adolescents’ news consumption is small compared to their use of entertainment content, especially their use of newspapers. Yet newspaper reading has the strongest media effect on indicators of youth socialization, after demographic and other controls, in conveying knowledge, stimulating discussion, encouraging reflection, and shaping attitudes. Attentive television news viewing has a positive though weaker impact. That is, news consumption encourages youth socialization through these internal and external forms of deliberation (McLeod, 2000; Yoon, McLeod, & Shah, 2005). Recent analysis focused on adolescents finds high levels of use and positive linkages between public-spirited Internet use and civic engagement. Research on young adults examining online news use, political messaging over e-mail, and other Internet communication tools suggests even more optimistic outcomes for adolescents (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

For young adults, there are substantial differences in the relationship between media and civic socialization depending on life course. There are points of departure between the college-bound, trade-school students, and those who directly enter the workforce or armed services. For many, media take on a larger role as a means of connecting socially and maintaining contact through e-mail and social networking. Newspaper reading and television news viewing remains low for those under age 40 (McLeod, 2000). Internet use, writ large, displays an opposite pattern. Young adults are the heaviest users, with use declining across older groups (Yoon et al., 2005).

As with adolescents, newspaper reading is among the strongest positive predictors of civic engagement among young adults, despite its low levels of use (McLeod, 2000). The Internet, because of its very heavy use among younger adults, appears to provide a more potent opportunity for civic mobilization. For example, Shah, McLeod, and Yoon (2001) reported that Internet use for search and exchange of information was most strongly related to both trust in people and in civic participation among the youngest adult cohorts in their sample. Indeed, some recent studies suggest that young people are encountering news and building community through online channels such as customized homepages, blogs, and social networking sites (Boyd, 2008). Thus, use of

Internet by the most recent cohorts may partly offset the loss in conventional news consumption via newspapers and television.

### INTERNET DYNAMICS AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Before the emergence of findings reporting beneficial effects of Internet use, some social critics claimed that Internet users become increasingly removed from meaningful social relationships and less likely to engage the community as they spend more and more time online (Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1996). The initial field research—the little there was—provided some support for this pessimistic view; panel analyses linked frequent Internet use to withdrawal from social connections and increased feelings of malaise (Kraut et al., 1998). However, these conclusions were questioned because these preliminary studies provided participants with free Internet access and unconventional web devices and then assessed the social effects. This type of procedure likely biased results, since participants may have felt compelled to take advantage of the free services. In addition, many of the “users” studied did not come to the Internet on their own, and therefore were unlike those who adopted the Internet on their own.

Fortunately, other scholars responded to these assertions with theorizing and empirical assessments that countered these claims. Some heralded that these communication innovations were bringing about an information revolution that would transform the structure of society (Bimber, 2003; Castells, 2001; Rheingold, 2002). Others provided evidence that popular uses of the Internet—messaging and searching—were related to tighter social linkages and greater engagement (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

Thus, the initial debate over the relationship between technological and social change was characterized in terms of utopian versus dystopian views of new communication technologies (see Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis, & Norris, 2004; Katz & Rice, 2002). The results of the first wave of research provided mixed results, in part because some studies employed access or time spent rather than specific uses, certain samples were not representative of the population, and causality and endogeneity problems were still being sorted out in this emerging field of inquiry (for a summary of this debate see Nie, 2001).

Since then, a new wave of studies has mostly refuted dystopian views of new communication technologies through distinct yet interrelated lines of inquiry. Probably the most robust line of inquiry is one that has extended the uses and gratifications approach to civic participation, showing that informational/news-seeking uses of new media are mostly related to increased engagement, whereas certain entertainment/diversion uses can be related to decreased participation (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). Related research has shown that online news use supplements, rather than displaces or replaces, traditional news consumption (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000) and that consumption of a particular content area complements the consumption of other channels in that same area (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). It also links Internet use to volunteerism and public attendance (Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002), civic engagement (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003), group membership, community involvement, and political activity (Kwak, Poor, & Skoric, 2006; Taveesin & Brown, 2006).

A related line of inquiry has focused on the effects of Internet adoption for whole

communities. This work has explored the possibility that despite the positive effects of online information seeking and interpersonal messaging—making a world of information and a geographically dispersed groups of friends readily available—it could have a negative impact on spatially bounded communities that continue to be central for civic and political activity. Rather than drawing people away from local connections, assessments by Wellman and colleagues in Canadian communities have provided empirical support for the notion that the Internet has a modest yet positive effect on these spatial-based communities in terms of increased sociability, voluntary association membership, and increased political participation (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Wellman et al., 2001; Wellmann, Quan-Haase, Boase, & Chen, 2003). Likewise, additional research has reported that individuals who participate in online communities are more likely to do so in spatial communities (Dutta-Bergman, 2006).

Emerging features, mostly based on network structures, provide new opportunities for researchers interested in new media and community building, particularly blogs, social networking sites, content sharing sites, and citizen journalism practices. Most prominent among these, blogs started in the mid 1990s, and gained traction during the turn of the millennium. These online journals typically feature a high level of interaction between the person in charge of the blog and those who participate in it and comment on it (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002). As such, blogs show signs of being virtual communities, including network connections in the form of links to other blogs, Web pages, and public forums (Bar-Ilan, 2005; Coleman, 2004; Drezner & Farrell, 2004; Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Singer, 2005; Thompson, 2003). This interactive quality, the reduced formality, and the ease of use have made blogs into breaking-news sites (Perlmutter, 2008; Thompson, 2003) that are increasingly central to communication and coordination by politicians (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005).

Studies have only begun to examine the general effects of blog use in the political realm (Eveland & Dylko, 2007). The most recent analyses indicate that political blog use functions similarly to news use, increasing engagement both online and offline (Gil de Zuniga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, forthcoming; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2007). This suggests a connection to citizen journalism, i.e., opening traditional news organizations to citizen participation in the news process or creating grass roots organizations based on citizen reporters' production of local content. Both of these possibilities should encourage civic engagement. This is also true of social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, which seek to connect people by making their social networks visible, facilitating their preservation and growth. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) provided initial evidence that Facebook enhances the ability to stay connected with members of previous spatial communities and contributes to bridging social capital. It remains to be seen whether the capacity to maintain social bonds, particularly weak ties, will result in increased civic participation in traditional arenas, or whether it will recompose civic engagement along networked forms, in which attention and consumption practices become central mechanisms of engagement.

Computer mediated communications are not the only innovations impacting civic engagement. With the advent and ubiquity of mobile telephony and other portable devices that permit sustained social contact as well as access to information, research has begun to illustrate their potential for civic action. Initial research suggests that despite a reduced potential for surveillance uses of the Internet, mobile phones seem to contribute to maintaining larger social networks (Miyata, Boase, Wellmann, & Ikeda, 2006), though concerns have been raised about the potential for increased selectivity that might result in higher levels of homophily in social networks (Matsuda, 2006). In

the coming years, this area of research promises to be vibrant, particularly with the convergence of increased content delivery capabilities to mobile phones as they merge with global positioning systems. In addition to existing lines of inquiry, research has also begun to explore new technologies as platforms for deliberation (Min, 2007; Pingree, 2007; Price & Cappella, 2002), the challenge of fostering civic engagement in virtual cities (Bers & Chau, 2006), and contextual differences in the effects of new technologies on civic engagement.

### COMMUNICATION MEDIATION AND CHANNELED EFFECTS

As some of this work suggests, media effects on civic life, whether stemming from digital and conventional communication modalities, are often indirect. This insight grows out of work on the *communication mediation model*, which concludes that informational media use and political discussion largely channel the effects of background dispositions and orientations on citizen learning and participation (McLeod et al., 2001; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). A strength of this model is the integration of mass and interpersonal communication into processes that result in civic and political engagement, as previously demonstrated by Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995).

This mediational approach is an outgrowth of the introduction of the O-S-O-R framework into political communication from social psychology (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). Moving beyond the simple stimulus-response (S-R) perspectives of direct and universal effects, the O-S-O-R framework recognized that there are a host of contextual, cultural, and motivational factors that people bring with them to the reception experience that affect how they process the message. Just as important, new orientations form "between reception of the message and the response of the audience member" that mediate effects onto outcome behaviors (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 1994, pp. 146-147). This perspective provides the foundations for communication mediation.

Notably, the communication mediation model treats both news and talk as stimuli (S), focusing on how they jointly mediate the effects of demographic, dispositional, and structural factors on cognitive and behavioral outcomes. To further specify this process, Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005) advanced a *citizen communication mediation model*. This model theorizes and finds that media's influences are strong, but largely indirect, shaping participatory behaviors through effects on discussion about news.

This conclusion was reached through a series of panel analyses that tested distinct causal orderings of key variables in different types of change models. After testing nearly two-dozen structural models, this work finds that the same mediational process that channels the effects of conventional news use through face-to-face political conversation operates for information seeking and political expression via the Internet. This new model adds to research on the relationship between information and participation in two ways: (a) it situates communication among citizens as a critical mediator between information seeking via the mass media and democratic outcomes, adding another step in the causal chain; and (b) it asserts that online pathways to participation complement existing offline pathways, adding a new mediational route.

It is important to note that this *citizen communication mediation model* contends that there are similarities but also important differences between talking about politics face-to-face (i.e., political discussion) and expressing political views in online settings (i.e. political messaging) for engagement in public life. Face-to-face political talk largely

occurs with family, friends, co-workers, and others within one's social network, and is thought to help citizens interpret media messages and construct meaning (Kim & Kim, 2008; Southwell & Yzer, 2007). Individuals who discuss politics are exposed to a wider range of perspectives, increasing their interest in politics, opinion quality, social tolerance, and participation (Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Mutz, 2002).

Political messaging may share some of these characteristics. However, it also permits the sharing of views with a much wider and dispersed array of people through "interactive messaging technologies such as e-mail, instant messaging, electronic bulletin boards, online chat, as well as feedback loops to news organizations and politicians" (Shah et al., 2005, p. 536). As such, the costs of mass expression and collective organizing are reduced, allowing individuals to "post, at minimal cost, messages and images that can be viewed instantly by global audiences" (Lupia & Sin, 2003, p. 316; cf. Hill & Hughes, 1998). Such messaging is also largely textual rather than verbal, and as such may produce stronger compositional effects associated with preparation for communication (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999).

Recently, additional advances were made to this model under the rubric of the *campaign communication mediation model* (Shah et al., 2007). This model considers the effects of exposure to political advertising as a contextual factor in analyses including print, broadcast, and Internet news use, as well as interpersonal and online political expression. Given the highly targeted and structured nature of political ad placement in modern campaigns, the integration of ad exposure with the communication mediation model brought elite and citizen behavior together into a coherent framework, attending to campaign message placement and individual communication practices.

Increasingly, election campaigns have been characterized by adversarial politics, with negative ads and contrast ads comprising large portions of what voters encounter (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999). This has raised concerns about the impact of political advertising, especially "attack" ads, as it relates to civic engagement, campaign participation, and turnout (Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002). Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) assert, based on survey and experimental evidence, that negative ads demobilize the electorate. They conclude that negativity suppresses turnout, in some cases by nearly 5%, and that it takes a broader toll on citizens' sense of efficacy, increasing cynicism and reducing their interest in the electoral process.

These assertions have been hotly disputed, especially claims of demobilization. For example, Finkel and Geer (1998) contended that even if attacks depress participation among some voters, the overall effect will be to increase interest in the election, strengthen ties to particular candidates, and stimulate political learning. Geer's (2006; also Martin, 2004) recent defense of campaign negativity extends this argument. Reviewing presidential campaigns from 1960 to 2004, he concluded that attack ads are more likely than positive ads to focus citizens' attention on the political issues defining the election, and in so doing, provide them with relevant political information to participate. This is consistent with Brader (2005), who finds that although positive ads may do a better job of motivating participation and activating partisan loyalties, negative ads stimulate vigilance and provide voters with persuasive information.

To examine these relationships, content-coded ad-buy data on the placement of campaign messages on a market-by-market and program-by-program basis were merged by Shah and his colleagues with a national panel data concerning patterns of traditional and digital media consumption and levels of civic and campaign participation. Exposure to campaign ads was estimated by developing an algorithm based on the market and program placement of specific ads and geo-coded survey respondents' viewing of the kinds

of television content in which ads were placed. A series of structural equation models revealed that exposure to political advertising has direct effects on information seeking via mass media, especially newspaper and television news use, but also online news (see Shah et al., 2007). As the ratio of advertising exposure became more negative, however, information seeking via conventional news sources was reduced. Informational media use was consistently found to encourage citizen communication, which in turn spurred civic and political participation. These scholars (2007) concluded,

Besides the direct effect of volume of campaign exposure on political participation, most campaign effects were mediated through other communication factors. Even the direct effects of newspaper use on civic and political participation did not diminish the general conclusion that media effects were largely indirect, channeled through political discussion and messaging. (p. 696)

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Internet use not only functions as an information resource but also a communication forum, both of which have implications for civic engagement. This is consistent with previous work by Price and Cappella (2002). Equally important, the effects of advertising—a contextual level phenomenon—appear to work through individuals' communication practices: first their media consumption, and then offline and online forms of political expression. This brings campaign dynamics and individual behaviors together into a single model of communication effects on civic and political engagement.

These findings have led the scholars contributing to the communication mediation perspective to propose a revision to the longstanding O-S-O-R framework (Cho et al., 2008). In its place, they advocate an O-S-R-O-R model of communication processes and effects, adding reasoning (R) as a critical mediator of stimulus (S) effects. This additional step attempts to capture the critical role of mental elaboration and social deliberation as conduits of media effects on outcome orientations (O2) and responses (R2). Since the information utilized in this reflective process might be biased or inaccurate, reasoning here is not meant to refer to the rationality of the outcome, but the depth of processing. This is consistent with the cognitive mediation model (Eveland, 2001; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003), which focuses on how reflection mediates the effects of motivations and messages on knowledge.

Currently, the S-O portion of the model is a jumble of factors, including news consumption, thinking and talking about issues, and cognitions and attitudes that arise from this process. Mental elaboration and interpersonal discussion are particularly difficult to situate in this framework. They are not stimuli in the formal sense, since they have been found to be causally antecedent of exposure to mass media (Eveland et al., 2003; Shah et al., 2005). However, they are also not conventional outcome orientations in the sense of altered attitudes or developed cognitions. Instead, they are between stimuli and outcome orientations, indicative of efforts to form an understanding and reason through ideas. Notably, this model also takes into account the contextual, disposition, and demographic factors that help shape media consumption choices.

## GEOGRAPHIC AND CROSS-NATIONAL CONTEXTS

Attention to the geographic context in which communication effects occur has defined the vanguard of research clarifying the links between media and civic participation.

Although it is well recognized that community properties influence civic engagement (Cho & McLeod, 2007; Haeberle, 1986; Huckfeldt, 1979; Oliver, 2000; Sampson, 1988), relatively little consideration is given to the intersection of local contexts and media use in studies of participation (cf. Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005). As a consequence, theorizing on contextual effects involving mass media—best illustrated by Pan and McLeod's "multi-level framework" (1991) and hinted by Anderson's notion of "imagined community" (1991)—has far outstripped the pace of empirical research. This is at least partly a function of the prevalence of individual-level data combined with the methodological and diagnostic complexities of multi-level analysis.

The first wave of formal efforts to understand the interplay of local media use with community norms (i.e., social stability and connectedness) was influenced by work that considered community properties as a force to moderate the connection between individuals' media use and civic engagement (see Kang & Kwak, 2003; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). From this perspective, community solidarity and cohesion are thought to amplify media effects on civic participation. Cohesive communities create a pro-civic milieu with an excess of close ties and opportunities for political discussion. This makes it easier for residents to translate information into participation at the local level (Friedland & McLeod, 1999; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995).

Media use is also thought to condition the influence of community characteristics on civic life. The media—particularly newspapers and local broadcast news—actively work to develop a local identity and symbolically reflect norms and features of the collective (Anderson, 1991; Kaniss, 1991). As a result, frequent news consumers are more likely to understand the symbolic properties and normative standards of the collective through the media (Stamm, 1985). The contextual influence of community properties on civic participation becomes greater as residents' informational media use increases and, accordingly, the awareness of community norms develops.

Research also indicates that individuals' media use functions as a mediator of the contextual influence of community properties on civic engagement. If one community is more socially connected and politically active than another, individuals within these communities feel certain pressures to keep track of community issues by attending to news media. That is, the norm of active citizenship increases the utility of being informed, and thus encourages residents to follow news coverage of community issues. Such informational media use, then, leads to engagement. Thus, certain features of community shape residents' media use patterns (Borgida et al., 2002; Olien, Donohue, & Tichenor, 1978; Sullivan, Borgida, Jackson, Riedel, & Oxendine, 2002), which in turn encourage engagement.

Analyses of these multi-level phenomena have been greatly advanced by developments in hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), which allows for more appropriate handling of multi-level data and, thus, more precise estimates of cross-level relationships (see Hayes, 2006; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Utilizing this approach, Paek, Yoon, and Shah (2005) found that reading local news increases the likelihood of community participation both at the individual level and as a function of readership in communities with higher levels of social interaction. They also observed cross-level interactions between individual-level differences in community integration and contextual variation in print news readership, providing support for the idea that high levels of news readership at the community level create a local print culture that has pro-civic consequences for socially integrated non-readers. Of course, such analyses require contextual data, which can vary in how geographic boundaries are defined (e.g., state, city, zip code, or census tract). Although aggregating individual scores of respondents within geographic

units in survey data can give proxy measures of community properties (see Cho & McLeod, 2007; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001), this approach can be problematic if the number of individual cases used to create contextual measures is not adequately large.

A natural direction for future contextual analyses includes cross-national studies that consider how cultural, political, policy, and media environments shape communication effects on civic engagement. Research has already provided evidence that conventional and digital media use can (a) foster online and offline sociability in the European Union (Räsänen & Kouvo, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) and Canada (Hampton & Wellman, 2003), (b) contribute to feelings of efficacy in Germany (Semetko & Valkenburg, 1998), (c) promote expressive political participation in Colombia (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2007), Japan (Kobayashi, Ikeda, & Miyata, 2006), and the Netherlands (de Vreese, 2007), and (d) enhance civic and political participation across the globe (Chang, 2007; Kim & Han, 2005; Lee, 2007; Rojas, 2006; Vromen, 2007).

Media may also be critical to community life within Diasporic communities (Hiller & Franz, 2004). The use of new communication technologies to retain emotional, personal, cultural, and political ties among migrants to their areas of origin and how these ties will shape their civic engagement in their place of migration offer great potential for inquiry. For example, d'Haenens, Koeman, and Saeys (2007) suggested that youth ethnic minorities in the Netherlands and Flanders use new communication technologies to orient themselves to the country where they reside but also to their parents' country of origin. This echoes the view offered by Matei and Ball-Rokeach (2001) in their study of ethnic communities in Los Angeles: "strong anchoring to offline social and cultural groups links cyberspace to rather than separates it from people's local communities" (p. 560). Clearly, many others who study media and civic engagement now share their view.

#### CODA ON UNDERSTANDING MEDIA EFFECTS

Efforts to counter fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of media effects on civic life have required scholars (a) to examine usage patterns so that media effects could be disaggregated, (b) to consider generational differences in media use and their implications for youth and young adult socialization, (c) to explore the rapidly changing terrain of the Internet and its social implications, (d) to extend the communication mediation framework to incorporate digital media technologies and campaign message placement, and (e) to revisit multi-level models of communications effects. This unpacking of media effects on civic engagement has not only helped move us closer to a more nuanced and complete understanding of the linkages between communication and community life, it provides a template through which a range of questions regarding media effects beyond the issue of civic engagement might be tackled.

Indeed, many of these same approaches to untangling media effects have been outside the context of civic engagement and political participation, per se. They have been employed to understand the underpinnings of political consumerism and socially conscious consumption (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005) as well as the issues of cultural capital (Holt, 1997). In this work, scholars have moved beyond monolithic treatment of media such as television and the Internet to consider patterns of use and effects (Keum, Devanathan, Deshpande, Nelson, & Shah, 2004). They have considered how older and younger adults differ not only in the media use, but how these modes of use help socialize and normalize certain forms of socially conscious consumption (de Vreese, 2007). The role of digital media has been examined alongside conventional

media forms, with both related to use of various products and services to understand the social positioning of taste (Friedland et al., 2007). Studies have even applied the communication mediation framework to the question of lifestyle politics and political consumerism, yielding clear support for the model and new insights about the intersection of consumer and civic culture (Shah et al., 2007). Further, these studies have been conducted across different national and cultural contexts.

This body of research illustrates that the approaches used to correct misunderstanding about media and civic culture have great potential to be extended beyond that narrow scope into seemingly related and more distal domains of inquiry. Indeed, the subfields of political communication, health communication, and science communication would all benefit from a full and systematic application of these guiding frameworks to empirical analyses. Although these domains of research do not suffer from the types of mischaracterizations of media effects that motivated much of the early work on communication and social capital, it is clear that a more complex and comprehensive picture of media effects in relation to political judgment, health behaviors, and scientific attitudes would emerge if scholars were to disaggregate media effects, consider differences across the life cycle, and more fully incorporate digital media and interpersonal conversation into their models of influence. We are hopeful that this synthesis of the literature on media and civic life not only will advance research on communication and participation, but also will encourage scholars exploring media effects, more generally, to avoid some of the misunderstanding that has characterized this work.

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