

Sharing and Discussing Politics on Facebook: A User and Network-Centric Approach

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Jeong & Long (2016)

What We've Learned About the Media Industry During This Election

By JOHN HERRMAN NOV. 8, 2016



At the same time, a brighter media narrative was unfolding in the growing importance of online social networks — the *real* new mass media. On Facebook and Twitter, election coverage could be consumed on a large

just how liberating these last years have felt for audiences. Facebook and Twitter, the cycle's most mature and influential platforms, may be profoundly centralized. But they explicitly place the individual at the center of his or her media universe, recording, amplifying and perpetuating their



Jeong & Long (2016)

Zuckerberg: 'Crazy' to Say Facebook Influenced Election

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS NOV. 11, 2016, 1:15 P.M. E.S.T.

But isn't social media just a reflection of our world as it exists? Has Facebook become an easy scapegoat when the answer is far more complex?

"By far the biggest filter in the system is not that the content isn't there, that you don't have friends who support the other candidate or that are of another religion," Zuckerberg said. "But it's that you just don't click on it. You actually tune it out when you see it. I don't know what to do about that."



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Facebook

- 72% of all adult internet users in the USA report using Facebook
 - 91% of them at least “a few times per week” (Duggan, 2015)
- Facebook users as likely as non-users to watch local/cable news, slightly less likely to read print newspapers (Pew, 2013)



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Facebook

- 41% of voting-age adults report getting public affairs information via Facebook regularly
 - 40% of them say it is “most important” source of news (Pew, 2015)
 - Most say hearing about news is not a reason they use Facebook (Pew, 2013)



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Facebook

- Network peers are tied to (almost) all political info on Facebook
 - Sharing, endorsing, discussing, etc.
- Not a news discussion community
 - Existing communities happen to discuss politics
- Content and social networks are highly diverse
 - How to avoid things you aren't interested in/disagree with?



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Questions

- What do users make of political content?
 - What draws their attention?
 - Do they pay attention to the **who** *and* the **what**?
- Is Facebook a platform for some low level of deliberation?
 - Political discussion
 - Media exposure
 - Selective exposure



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Motivations

- Few studies place Facebook stimuli into the context of real social networks
- Those who have used social network information have had compelling results
 - Close ties may influence voting turnout (Bond et al., 2012)
 - Cross-cutting exposure (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015)



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Motivations

- Skepticism of self-reported frequencies of Facebook behaviors (survey research)
- Recent changes to Facebook policy
 - Privacy



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Method: Focus Groups

- 10 focus groups, 50 participants
 - Aged 18 to 30 (M = 20.78, SD = 2.54)
 - 36% male
 - 70% white
 - 30% Republican, 22% Democrat, rest Independent/can't say
 - December 2015 to March 2016
- Open-ended discussions guided by a moderator
 - 60 minutes



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Analysis

- Video-taped sessions coded for content
 - Open coding, inductive approach
- Both analysts work on set of common sessions, compare results, identify themes
 - Rest are coded independently
 - Assessment of which themes persisted across sessions



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Results Overview – Themes

- Reluctance to engage in political discussion
- Active assessment of friends' posting behavior
- Perception of Facebook as having older, more socially diverse network than other SNSs



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Reluctance to engage in political discussions

- Interested in discussions, just not *participating*
 - Underestimating own participation?
- Who will see what I say?
- Counterattitudinal content catches attention



“I might open to see why in the world someone would share something like that . . . [but] I don’t want them to think that I approve.”



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Active assessment of posting behavior

- Who talks politics on Facebook
 - What they think
- Recall of disagreement
- Content = sharer
- Others are “extreme”



“Even if you don’t see them a lot [offline], you know whether they have a lot of the same thoughts you do.”



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Facebook is made distinct by its users

- Breadth/diversity of network
 - Family, close and extended
 - Differently-aged friends
 - Old friends
 - Acquaintances
- Weak ties and political content
 - Unfriending/unfollowing appears reserved for especially egregious cases



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Conclusions

- Expect cross-cutting exposure on Facebook
- Effects on stereotyping, affective polarization?
- How influential are views expressed by weak ties?
- Reluctance to participate—a bad omen?