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Examining Differential Gains From Mass Media and Their Implications for Participatory Behavior

The idea of interpersonal discussions among citizens being the “soul of democracy” has been treated almost as a truism in recent research on media, interpersonal communication, and democratic citizenship. Without a doubt, there is strong evidence to support the notion that interpersonal discussion of politics is a key antecedent of political participation. This study proposes that the relationships between hard news media use, interpersonal discussion of politics, and participatory behavior are far more complex than previously assumed. Specifically, it is expected that hard news media use has an overall positive main effect on political participation. This main effect, however, cloaks significantly different effects for people who talk to others about politics rather frequently and those who do not. National survey data support the differential gains model for newspaper and television hard news use. This article explores explanations for this phenomenon and implications for future research and policy.

Interpersonal discussion of politics is at the core of much scholarly discussion about democratic citizenship (for an overview, see Schudson, 1998). More recent research, however, suggests that the influence of interpersonal discussion of politics on democratic processes is far more complex than previously assumed (Eliasoph, 1998; Scheufele, Moy, & Friedland, 1999). These researchers have suggested that the impact of media content on citizens' understanding of politics and ultimately on participatory behavior might be contingent on discussing politics with others. Interpersonal discussion, in other words, moderates the potentially informational influence of mass media on its audiences. Although there is an overall positive impact of various types of public affairs media use on understanding of politics and political behavior, this influence differs depending on the degree to which individuals

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talk about politics with other people. Specifically, it is assumed that talking about certain issues with other citizens will help people to understand these issues in all their complexity, tying them to other, preexisting knowledge, and consequently meaningfully participating in political life.

Of course, this assumption has immense normative and empirical implications for democratic systems. This article examines a differential-gains model of interpersonal discussion of politics from both angles. It addresses normative questions, based on previous theorizing and research. It also translates the model into testable theoretical statements. National survey data, collected as part of Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie's (1995) Civic Participation Study, are used to provide insights into the moderating role of interpersonal discussion and its effects of different types of political knowledge and participatory behavior.

The Criterion: Political Participation

Before I explicate the differential-gains hypothesis in greater detail, it is necessary to take a closer look at political participation as a construct. A large body of research has focused on the multidimensionality of the concept. Most studies, however, have been unable to identify a consistent set of subdimensions (e.g., Crewe, 1981; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978). As a result, more recent research has relied mostly on unidimensional operationalizations of political participation (for an overview, see Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). All of these are derived from conceptual definitions that are similar to the one put forth by Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie (1995): "Political participation is activity that is intended to or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action" (p. 9).²

Treating political participation as a criterion or outcome variable, of course, raises questions with respect to its relationships with variables like political knowledge, media use, or interest. In fact, scholars like Zaller (1990) have suggested treating participation as an indicator of a more general, latent construct called awareness. Political awareness, for Zaller (1990, 1992), is composed of five items—political information, political participation, media exposure, interest in politics, and education—with political information, Zaller argues, being the best indicator overall. Using the label "political expertise," Fiske, Lau, and Smith (1990) developed a very similar conceptualization. They identified five dimensions of political expertise: political knowledge, political activity, print media use, electronic media use, and political self-schema.

The problem with Zaller's (1990) and also Fiske et al.'s (1990) conceptualizations, however, is that they are weaker empirically than the authors claim. Zaller, for example, assesses construct validity by predicting voter turnout with all of five indicators of awareness. It is not surprising that the relationships differed substantially across the five indicators, with participation being the strongest predictor of turnout overall.

In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the relationships he finds are mediated by a wide variety of variables. As a result, the processes that link media use and knowledge variables to participation are likely far more complex than Zaller assumes. Krosnick and Milburn (1990) sum up the criticism. Specifically, they found relationships among different indicators of awareness such as media use, political knowledge, and political participation. However, according to Krosnick and Milburn (1990), "these relations are so complex and not always so strong as to support the claim that opinionation, knowledge, and the other dimensions all reflect the same single underlying construct" (p. 69).

Participation, Information, and Interpersonal Communication

Most current research on participatory behavior is based on a very fundamental assumption: Citizens' participation in democratic processes is a necessary condition for a healthy, functioning democracy. Referring to electoral participation more specifically, Dennis (1991) writes,

We also connect voting to major matters such as who holds power and what the holders of that power are able to do with it. Despite their limitations as mechanisms of popular control of rulers and policies, elections do have some tangible and symbolic effect on the process of government. (p. 23)

Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee's (1954) observation that getting all citizens to participate in politics is both unrealistic and undesirable from a normative standpoint is probably correct. Certain levels of participation, however, are necessary to ensure a functioning democracy that relies on a system of representation and therefore an informed electorate.

Information and participation. Based on this assumption, the constant decrease in levels of political participation are somewhat disconcerting. Dennis (1991), for example, argued that "since 1960 there has been a substantial erosion in American electoral participation" (p. 23). But even if there was no decline in political participation, levels of participation are not as high as

they could be expected to be based on increasing levels of formal education over the previous decades.

Increasing levels of participation also could have been expected based on an increasingly rich information environment, including recent technological advances in electronic communications. By creating an interactive information environment, Abramson, Arterton, and Orren (1988) argue, electronic media seems capable of turning disparate groups or communities into an “electronic commonwealth.” Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) state that the emerging information environment is “so rich that the costs of learning about politics [should] be reduced significantly for most citizens” (p. 112). Consequently, levels of current-events knowledge and, as a function of increases in knowledge, political participation should be higher.

Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996) have attempted to explain this seemingly paradoxical pattern by introducing the concept of a relative effect of education on political participation:

While absolute educational attainment has an important impact on levels of political engagement, increases in education over time do not lead to commensurate increases in engagement. This is true because the educational environment is also becoming more competitive, thus requiring more and more education to yield the same amount of political engagement. (p. 142)

Based on their theorizing, the effort that individuals have to put into political participation as well as the expected outcomes vary depending on their relative educational attainment. In other words, political participation is expected to be a function of a person’s educational attainment relative to “the education of others with whom they compete” (Nie et al., 1996, p. 142).

The role of mass and interpersonal communication. More recently, however, research has suggested that a more careful focus on the types of communication people engage in and therefore the types of information they are exposed to might explain many of the variations in participatory behavior (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Specifically, Eveland and Scheufele (2000) suggested that citizens’ understanding of politics may depend on an interactive effect of mass and interpersonal communication. That is, people who engage in interpersonal discussion with others about what they have read or heard in mass media will have disproportionately higher levels of understanding than people who engage in political discussions with others less frequently.

This argument is consistent with some of Eliasoph's (1998) more ethnographic research. Her findings indicate that the impact of media content on an understanding of politics and ultimately on participatory behavior might indeed be contingent on discussing politics with others: "Talking through vague political ideas, playing with their ideas in the light of day" (p. 231) helps citizens to understand political processes, reconcile potentially inconsistent points of view, and make informed decisions.

The question left unanswered by much of this research, however, is about potential explanations of this phenomenon. How does talking about politics help citizens to extract certain information from mass media and ultimately influence their ability or willingness to participate in politics? Or, to put it more pessimistically, why is it so hard for citizens to distill relevant pieces of information from the large flow of messages they are exposed to on a daily basis? At least three explanations can be offered.

The first explanation has to do with the content that mass media provide or rather do not provide and that enables citizens to participate meaningfully in politics on a day-to-day basis. Lemert (1981) has called this type of information "mobilizing information." This includes information on how to get a permit for holding a rally, information on where to vote, or simply information about public meetings. Lemert (1981) argues that the proportion of mobilizing information in today's news coverage is significantly lower than it used to be, making it increasingly harder for citizens to identify outlets for participating in various political processes. Interpersonal discussion of politics might help overcome this shortcoming in media content and help citizens to figure out ways to participate. Political discussion might be to a large degree about sharing experiences, applying mass-mediated information to the real world, and figuring out ways of translating media content into ways of participating in the political process.

In addition to the mere content, however, trends in how news media cover politics could provide a second explanation for the importance of interpersonal and intrapersonal reflection in promoting participatory behavior. More specifically, Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) have identified a trend in presentation style in local newspapers in the United States that they call the "new long journalism." Their analysis of newspaper coverage over the course of 100 years showed that coverage has become longer, more analytical, and increasingly complex. This has implications for its appeal to readers. The length and complexity of news reports make it hard for audiences to extract information about the political system. Above all, however, Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) conclude, "the recent stories are fiercely dull" (p. 51). As a result, the way news are presented makes it harder and harder for audiences to extract everyday information about political processes, issues, and actors.

In addition to being less appealing to readers, however, the new long journalism is potentially related to a third explanation for why interpersonal discussion has become increasingly important for helping readers extract relevant political information from newspapers. Whereas discussions among citizens might arguably have been more common in the past (e.g., Schudson, 1998), the new long journalism might in fact discourage readers from discussing what they have read with other people or thinking about it in greater detail. Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) only allude to this possibility. Newspaper users, they argue, no longer read entire narratives—mostly because these narratives are no longer available—but rather scan information and only retain bits and pieces of them. This is consistent with the distinction that Kosicki and McLeod (1990) made between what they called “selective scanners” (i.e., people who only attend to news content that interests them directly) and people who process news content more carefully and try to integrate it into what they already know. If Barnhurst and Mutz’s (1997) assumption holds true, of course, the implications would be exactly what the differential gains model predicts: People who process news content more carefully by talking it over with others are also more likely to extract relevant pieces of political knowledge. And given Barnhurst and Mutz’s (1997) trend data, the gap between those who do discuss politics with others and those who do not might widen even more in the future.

These shortcomings of media coverage, of course, can only explain part of the media-discussion interaction. The question remains why interpersonal discussion of politics can remedy some of these shortcomings. One explanation is provided by uses and gratifications research. Specifically, this line of research has identified a set of gratifications audiences seek from mass media (Herzog, 1944, 1961; McLeod & Becker, 1974; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985). Among the many and often inconsistent conceptualizations of gratifications, “interpersonal utility” is especially relevant here. It refers to people’s motivation to use mass media to acquire information that they can pass on to others in conversations or that they can use as arguments in discussions with others (Greenberg, 1975). In other words, having more frequent political discussions with others may also prompt individuals to more closely scrutinize media reports and to process messages more carefully for two reasons. First, for those individuals who anticipate talking to others about political information garnered from mass media, there should be a cognitive tuning effect prior to their discussions (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1995). In this process, individuals try to make sense of information—especially contradictory or incomplete information that they received from mass media—to be able to better describe the information to others or perhaps to defend it during future discussions. Second, some individuals may not fully understand

the information presented in mass media. Talking about this information with others, therefore, may help them to acquire additional information or clarify potential ambiguities in the media accounts. In other words, interpersonal discussion serves as an important tool of information seeking for these individuals if media provide them with only insufficient or ambiguous information.

How Mass and Interpersonal Communication Interact

All of these explanations, of course, imply an essentially interactive relationship between mass and interpersonal communication in their impact on participatory behavior. Specifically, the impact of mass mediated information on a person's understanding of politics and ultimately participatory behavior should be highest if this person exposes himself or herself to relevant information in mass media and, at the same time, talks about it to other people, learns about other ways of thinking about the issue, and ultimately develops a better understanding of the problem and possible ways of solving it. If a person neither uses media nor engages in any form of discussion of political issues with others, the effects on participatory behavior should be minimal.³

Based on this reasoning, I expect ordinal interactions (see Aiken & West, 1991) between interpersonal discussion and types of hard news media use in their impact on participatory behavior. Previous research suggests that the strength of the media-discussion interaction depends to some degree on the specific medium people are using. Whereas newspapers are mostly used with an explicit informational intent (e.g., Chaffee & Frank, 1996), television is often considered a more passive medium that fosters what has been labeled "learning without involvement" (Krugman, 1965). One explanation for this difference between newspaper and television news is the argument that less educated subgroups of society may have greater difficulties comprehending the information conveyed in newspapers, simply based on the way news is presented (Kleinnijenhuis, 1991). In contrast, "the information in television news may be more accessible to those with weaker cognitive skills and less background knowledge" (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000, p. 220). As a result, the role of interpersonal discussion of politics in helping audiences to extract relevant information from news media might be more pronounced for newspaper news use than it is for television news use. I will therefore conduct a separate test of Hypothesis 1, broken down by the type of medium. Overall, however, the empirical evidence from previous research does not warrant separate formal hypotheses for the two types of news media.

Hypothesis 1: The impact of hard news use on political participation is moderated by a person's interpersonal discussion about politics. The relationship will be stronger for people with high levels of discussion than for people with lower levels of discussion.

It is possible, of course, that these relationships are to a large degree mediated (i.e., that the links from interpersonal discussion and hard news media use to participation are mostly a function of an increase in current-events knowledge that in turn increases people's likelihood of participating in various types of activities). Most studies (e.g., Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) have shown that political knowledge is directly and positively related to political participation. Knowledge, in all of these studies, is conceptualized as factual or current-events knowledge (i.e., knowledge about political issues or actors that is relevant in a contemporary political context).

With respect to participatory behavior, factual or current-events knowledge fulfills at least three purposes (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). It allows citizens to make informed decisions, it creates a sense of civic duty among citizens, and it increases familiarity with bureaucratic institutions and political processes. All of these factors are important necessary conditions for engaging in some form of traditional participation. Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is posed:

Hypothesis 2: The impact of the interaction of hard news use and a person's discussion about politics on political participation will be mediated by political knowledge.

Method

Data

The data used for the analyses of the differential gains model come from the 1990 American Citizen Participation Study, a national survey of political and nonpolitical civic participation with 2,517 face-to-face interviews. The fieldwork was conducted by the National Opinion Research Center.⁴

The variables used for the analyses presented here can be grouped into three categories: (a) exogenous variables that are not influenced by any other variables in the model, (b) antecedent endogenous variables that influence and are influenced by other variables, and (c) consequence endogenous variables. (For specific question wording, see Appendix 1.)

Four variables enter the models as exogenous variables. *Age* ($\bar{x} = 42.4$) and *gender* (53% females) are straightforward in their measurement. *Education* was measured as formal years of schooling ($\bar{x} = 13.3$). For *total household income*, participants were grouped into six categories ranging from 0 to 5 ($\bar{x} = 1.5$).

Eight variables serve as antecedent endogenous variables. *Interest in politics* was measured as an additive index of reported interested in local and national politics ($r = .58$). For *exposure to newspaper public affairs content*, two items measuring exposure to content concerning local and national politics were combined into an additive index ($r = .55$). *Exposure to news and public affairs content on television* was operationalized using two 7-point scales ranging from 0 to 6 ($r = .33$). *Frequency of interpersonal discussion about politics* was a two-item additive index comprising discussion of local and national politics ($r = .61$). *Political knowledge* was measured as an eight-item additive index of civics-book type knowledge of politics and current affairs ($\alpha = .66$). Unfortunately, the measures of *political efficacy* employed in the study did not differentiate between external and internal dimensions (e.g., Abramson, 1983). Following Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), four measures were combined into an additive index ($\alpha = .80$). *Political participation* was the final dependent variable of interest. Eight forms of participatory behavior were combined into an additive index ($\alpha = .63$).

Analytic Methods

The research hypotheses in this study state expectations about ordinal interactive effects or, more specifically, contributory conditions. Previous research has consistently shown main effects of hard news media use on participatory behavior (for an overview, see McLeod et al., 1999). These average main effects, however, can be disaggregated into significantly different effects for participants with different levels of discussion. Participants who talk to others more frequently are more likely to develop a more thorough understanding of politics and consequently engage in participatory behavior. In other words, the effects of different types of media content on participation differ in strength, depending on participants' levels of interpersonal discussion.

To test the interactive relationships hypothesized earlier in a multivariate model, it is necessary to build a hierarchical regression model that enters demographic, structural, and informational controls⁵ first, followed by the main effects of different types of media use and interpersonal discussion, and finally by the interaction term (e.g., Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990).⁶ As recommended by Cohen and Cohen (1983), the main effect variables are standardized by translating them into z-scores

Table 1
Test for Interactions Predicting Political Participation

	Political Participation	
	Newspaper Hard Use × Political Discussion	TV Hard Use × Political Discussion
Demographics (4)		
R^2 (%)	24.7**	24.7**
Predispositions (2)		
Incremental R^2 (%)	12.4**	12.4**
Information Variables (2)		
Media use	.10**	.03
Political discussion	.19**	.19**
Incremental R^2 (%)	2.3**	1.9**
Interaction (1)		
Media use × Political Discussion	.30**	.06**
Incremental R^2 (%)	.7**	.3**
Total R^2 (%)	40.0**	39.2**

Note. All coefficients are before-entry betas.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$.

before the product term is formed to avoid multicollinearity problems between the product term and its components.

Results

As outlined earlier, results from both qualitative (e.g., Eliasoph, 1998) and quantitative research (e.g., Eveland & Scheufele, 1998) suggest that the effect of mass-mediated information depends on how much individuals discuss politics with others. Specifically, I examined the impact of people's exposure to news content in newspapers and television on political current-events knowledge and participation, moderated by their levels of interpersonal discussion about politics.

As Table 1 shows, all types of media use had a significant main effect on political participation, even after controlling for demographic variables, opinion leadership, and political interest. Hard news content on newspapers was related to participation at $\beta = .10$; television hard news content did not show a significant relationship ($\beta = .03$). Discussion of politics with others showed a relatively strong significant main effect of $\beta = .19$.

In addition to these main effects, however, Table 1 shows significant interactions between interpersonal discussion of politics and all three types of media use on political participation. In other words, the interaction terms accounted for substantial amounts of the variance in political participation

Table 2
Test for Interactions Predicting Factual Knowledge

	Current-Events Knowledge	
	Newspaper Hard Use × Political Discussion	TV Hard Use × Political Discussion
Demographics (4)		
R^2 (%)	18.6**	18.6**
Predispositions (2)		
Incremental R^2 (%)	2.7**	2.7**
Information variables (2)		
Media use	.10**	-.01
Political discussion	.14**	.14**
Incremental R^2 (%)	1.4**	1.0**
Interaction (1)		
Media use × Political Discussion	.19**	-.03
Incremental R^2 (%)	.3**	.1
Total R^2 (%)	23.0**	22.3**

Note. All coefficients are before-entry betas.

above and beyond demographics, political interest, and the main effects of interpersonal discussion and media use.

The positive interaction between newspaper hard news use and interpersonal discussion of politics ($\beta = .30$) was significant. More specifically, the relationship between newspaper readership and political participation is significantly stronger for participants who engage in interpersonal discussion of politics more often (unstandardized slope of .32, $p \leq .01$) than for participants who discuss politics with others less frequently (unstandardized slope of .20, $p \leq .01$).

For hard news television use, the main effect was positive but did not reach conventional levels of significance ($\beta = .03$). The interaction term for television hard news use was positive and significant ($\beta = .06$). This suggests that the relationship between television hard news use and political participation was stronger for participants who talked to others more frequently about politics (unstandardized slope of .33, $p \leq .01$) than for participants who did not (unstandardized slope of .14, n.s.).

To answer Hypothesis 2, I tested the same set of equations with factual political knowledge as the criterion. Although the patterns seem somewhat similar, the coefficients are somewhat weaker (see Table 2). The impact of newspaper hard news use on political knowledge was higher for participants who engaged in political discussions with others more often than for participants who did not ($\beta = .19$). Television hard news viewers who talked about

politics frequently did not differ significantly from viewers who did not talk about politics in their levels of factual knowledge.

For a more stringent test of the mediation hypothesized in Hypothesis 2, I followed a procedure outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), who list three necessary conditions for mediation to take place.

First, the independent variable (the media-discussion interaction) should account for significant amounts of variance in the mediator variable (factual knowledge). As shown in Table 1, after controls for demographics, predispositions, and informational variables, the interaction of newspaper hard news use and political discussion was significantly related to factual knowledge. For television, this link was not significant.

Second, the mediator variable (factual knowledge) accounts for significant amounts of variance in the dependent variable (political participation). When entered into the models outlined in Table 1 as a last block, factual knowledge still showed significant betas of $\beta = .13$ for newspaper hard news use and $\beta = .14$ for television hard news use, even with the respective interactions controlled for (tables not shown here).

Third, if the two links outlined above are controlled for, the link between the independent variable (the media-discussion interaction) and the dependent variable (political participation) should be reduced to nonsignificance. For television hard news use, this third condition is largely irrelevant because the interaction did not have a direct significant impact on political knowledge influence to begin with. For newspaper hard news use, however, the regression model showed significant and simultaneous direct links from both the media-discussion interaction and factual knowledge to political participation. In other words, factual knowledge is one mediator of the link between the media-discussion interaction and participation, but it is definitely not the only one.

Conclusions

The notion of differential gains from mass media is not new; the idea, however, that interpersonal discussion is the key moderator in the media use-participation relationship is. The theoretical model developed here and the findings largely supporting the models reinforce de Tocqueville's (1835/1984) notion that political talk is the soul of democracy. The key role commonly attributed to interpersonal discussion in democratic societies, of course, stems from its direct impact on various forms of participatory behavior (McLeod et al., 1999). More important, however, this study shows that interpersonal discussion plays a role in the reception and processing of

political news when it comes to translating mass-mediated messages into meaningful individual action. Consequently, people who are frequent hard news users are significantly more likely to engage in various forms of political action if they talk these issues through with others than are frequent news users who talk to others less often.

Of course, the data impose some limitations on the generalizability of the findings. First, as I have argued in this article, the potentially crucial role of interpersonal discussion in helping people extract meaningful mobilizing information from news media is based on the assumption that this type of information is not well-presented in news coverage or even absent from it altogether. The tests of learning effects in the area of mobilizing information presented in this article, however, are somewhat limited by the knowledge items that were available. Most of these focused on names of public officials and a broader understanding of the political process rather than concrete mobilizing information (i.e., information on how or where to participate in various political activities). This may explain why the influence of the interaction of newspaper hard news use and interpersonal discussion of politics on political participation is only in part mediated by political knowledge in this study. It can be expected that with a more refined measure of what could be called mobilizing or procedural knowledge we would find a complete mediation.

Second, the measures of media use and interpersonal discussion of politics are context-independent. That is, they do not tap discussion about specific issues that a participant has heard or read about in news media. It is not clear, however, if this is necessarily a shortcoming. Specifically, research by Fishkin (1995) suggests that experimentally synchronizing messages and topic of the conversation would produce even stronger effects than the ones observed in this study. In his work on deliberative polls, he provided his subjects with written materials to inform them about a number of issues. He then facilitated discussions among his subjects to “get everyone thinking and discussing the issues” (Fishkin, 1995, p. 171). The combined outcome of information and deliberation, he concludes, will be a more mature citizen who understands the complexities of political issues and is capable of making informed decisions. Regardless of some of the criticism that has been voiced with respect to Fishkin’s research (e.g., Merkle, 1996), it should be noted that a design similar to his could be employed to test the media-talk interactions hypothesized in this study in a more artificial and therefore more controlled setting.

Even with less control over the content of people’s conversations, this study demonstrates consistent interactive effects of interpersonal discussion

of politics and hard news media use on participatory behavior, supporting Hypothesis 1. Specifically, participants who discuss politics with others more frequently show significantly stronger effects of newspaper hard news use on political activities than do participants who discuss politics less frequently or not at all. It is important to note, of course, that this finding did not hold for television hard news use.

This has important implications for how we conceptualize the influence of communication variables on political behavior in future research. More important, however, the findings from this study raise normative questions for democratic systems, more generally. This article has offered a number of explanations for what I have labeled the “differential gains model.” Most of these explanations are systemic, such as the idea of long-term changes in the mode of newspaper coverage. As Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) have argued, these changes might be in part due to the competition that newspapers are facing from television or, more recently, the Internet. The assumption behind this reasoning, of course, is that newspapers are forced into more in-depth coverage of politics that most readers find harder and harder to process. Consequently, media outlets such as television or the Internet should be expected to offer more up-to-the-minute but less detailed coverage⁷ of the same issues that requires a lot less effort to process and understand. Interactive effects of hard news media use and interpersonal discussion of politics therefore should be expected to be a lot weaker for television or even the Internet. The analyses presented here indicate that this might indeed be the case—at least for hard news television use. The question if Web-based news coverage is capable of effectively communicating and mobilizing a wide cross-section of citizens remains to be answered in future research.

Appendix 1

Question Wording

Political Interest:

Thinking about your local community, how interested are you in local community politics and local community affairs?

How interested are you in national politics and national affairs?

- (a) not interested
- (b) slightly interested
- (c) somewhat interested
- (d) very interested

Interpersonal Communication:

How often do you discuss local community politics or local community affairs with others?

How often do you discuss national politics or national affairs with others?

- (a) never
- (b) less than once a week
- (c) once or twice a week
- (d) nearly every day
- (e) every day

News & Public Affairs Television Use:

How often do you watch a national news broadcast on television?

Besides the news, how often do you watch some type of public affairs program on television?

- (a) never
- (b) less than once a month
- (c) once a month
- (d) several times a month
- (e) every day

Newspaper Use:

How much attention do you pay to stories on national and world politics and public affairs? A great deal, some, very little, or none?

How much attention do you pay to local politics and community affairs? A great deal, some, very little, or none?

- (a) none
- (b) very little
- (c) some
- (d) a great deal

Factual Knowledge:

We want to know how well you know the different governmental leaders around here. If you happen to know, what are the names of the United States senators from [STATE WHERE R LIVES]?

Name of second senator.

Could you tell me the name of the Congressman or Congresswoman from this district? Do you happen to know his or her name?

What about the name of the person who is your state representative to the [STATE WHERE R LIVES] House of Representatives/Assembly/House of Delegates?

Do you happen to know your representative's/assemblyman's or assemblywoman's/delegate's name?

What is the name of the head of the local public school system?

We are interested in how much people know about American government. On average over the past few years, did the federal government spend more money on the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) or Social Security?

Does the Fifth Amendment to the American Constitution mainly guarantee citizens protection against forced confessions, or mainly guarantee freedom of speech?

When people talk about "civil liberties," do they usually mean the right to vote and run for office, or freedom of speech, press, and assembly?

Political Efficacy:

If you had some complaint about local government activity and took that complaint to a member of the local government council, do you think that he or she would pay a lot of attention to what you say, some attention, very little attention, or none at all?

If you had some complaint about national government activity and took that complaint to a member of the local government council, do you think that he or she would pay a lot of attention to what you say, some attention, very little attention, or none at all?

How much influence do you think someone like you can have over local government decisions? A lot, some, very little, or none at all?

How much influence do you think someone like you can have over national government decisions? A lot, some, very little, or none at all?

- (a) none
- (b) very little
- (c) some
- (d) a lot

Political Participation:

Has R worked as a volunteer in the past 12 months?

Has R contributed money in the past 12 months?

Has R contacted an official in the past 12 months?

Has R protested in the past 2 years?

Was R active as a board/council member in the past 2 years?

Does R attend meetings regularly?

Was R informally active in the past 12 months?

Is R registered to vote or has she or he ever voted?

Notes

1. I would like to thank Michael Roloff for very helpful comments and suggestions throughout the review process.

2. In this sense, political participation is explicitly defined as *activity*. This makes it conceptually different from informational and communicatory processes such as media use or interpersonal discussion of politics. This conceptual distinction is mirrored by previous empirical research that identified mass and interpersonal communication as important antecedents of political participation (e.g., Greenberg, 1975; McLeod et al., 1999; Scheufele et al., 1999).

3. Of course, interpersonal discussion is not necessarily always about politics. Specifically, Schudson (1997) argues that political discussion can take two forms: political discussion and sociable conversation. *Political discussion* is defined as discussion about political issues in a very narrow sense (i.e., as the exchange of information that is relevant to the understanding of and participation in political processes). *Sociable*

conversation, on the other hand, is defined as everyday exchanges among citizens about human-interest or leisure-related issues. It is important to note that the reasoning underlying the interactive influence of media use and interpersonal discussion of politics in this article does not include sociable conversation.

4. The data set (Study Nr. 6635) as well as specifics on sampling procedures and question wording are available from the ICPSR data archive (<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>). For specific details, such as sampling procedures, response rates, and so on, see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995).

5. Specifically, political interest and efficacy were included as controls to account for participants' general levels of involvement in politics. These controls are likely to attenuate the strength of other relationships in the models and therefore further increase the confidence in the relationships that are found to be significant.

6. The issues of using betas versus Bs and before-entry versus final betas seem to be especially noteworthy here. First, I decided to use betas rather than Bs because the media-use variables were measured in completely different metrics. Comparing coefficients across different regression models is therefore a lot easier with standardized betas. Second, the use of before-entry betas has certain advantages in the context of testing interactions because it allows us to examine the impact of each variable as it enters the equation. Because the interaction term is entered last, the distinction between before-entry and final betas, of course, is irrelevant because the two coefficients in this case are identical.

7. Unfortunately, there is little systematic research on content differences between the World Wide Web and traditional media sources (Stempel & Stewart, 2000). Given the fact that online versions of newspapers, for example, often still provide only part of their printed issues online, however, suggests that certain types of news content or in-depth commentary can still only be found in more traditional media outlets.

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