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THE DIGITAL AGE OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Social Media, Political Exposure, and the Challenges of the Digital Public Sphere^{1,2}

ABSTRACT: This article explores the complex relationship between political engagement and the use of social media, focusing on the interaction between online and offline participation. While digital platforms have been hailed for their democratic potential and capacity to expand access to the political sphere, the evidence reviewed suggests that social media do not necessarily facilitate political engagement in contemporary societies. The study synthesizes key findings from recent research to highlight how algorithmic filtering, echo chambers, and the spread of disinformation distort political exposure and hinder meaningful participation. Despite increased opportunities for mobilization, digital political activity often remains limited to low-cost, low-commitment actions that rarely translate into offline collective engagement. Furthermore, the literature has not yet advanced sufficiently in identifying the causal mechanisms that explain how online and offline participation influence one another. This gap prevents a full understanding of whether digital participation helps bridge or widen existing gaps in

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political engagement. In doing so, the article questions whether contemporary democracies are becoming increasingly disconnected from the voices of their citizens, despite the apparent connectivity offered by social networks.

Keywords: political participation, social media, online activism, digital democracy

INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital platforms, particularly social media, has reshaped the way individuals engage with political information, communicate their views, and participate in democratic processes. These platforms have created unprecedented opportunities for political mobilization and engagement, yet they also pose significant challenges, such as polarization, misinformation, and algorithmic bias. Understanding the interplay between digital political exposure and participation is crucial for assessing the democratic implications of the digital age.

This study conducts a narrative literature review that integrates recent empirical evidence on the links between digital political exposure, information consumption on social media, and forms of online and offline political participation. The selected studies share an empirical approach based on observable data – surveys, experiments, or analyses of digital interaction – and address phenomena such as incidental news exposure, algorithmic filtering, polarization, and digital activism. The review covers the period 2009-2025, coinciding with the consolidation of social media as a central space for political socialization. It includes only research published in academic journals of communication and political science, excluding theoretical works.

POLITICAL CONTENT ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS: A CATALYST FOR ENGAGEMENT OR A DRIVER OF POLARIZATION?

The rapid expansion of the Internet and social media has enabled individuals to engage in social and political activism in ways that were previously unimaginable.³ The media play a fundamental role in shaping public opinion and disseminating political information, exerting a decisive influence on democratic participation.⁴ Political participation refers to individual or collective actions that support or oppose state structures

³ M. Chayinska, D. Miranda, R. González, “A Longitudinal Study of the Bidirectional Causal Relationships between Online Political Participation and Offline Collective Action,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 121 (2021), 106810.

⁴ M.X. Delli Carpini, “Gen.Com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment,” *Political Communication*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2000), pp. 341-349.

or decisions regarding public goods.⁵ Political engagement, a related yet broader and variably defined construct, denotes individuals' involvement with political institutions, processes, and decision-making, encompassing a wider repertoire of actions than standard participation measures capture.^{6,7} However, there is a growing agreement that in the digital era both political participation and political engagement are increasingly channeled through the Internet, social media, and Web 2.0.^{8,9}

In this context, digital social media has become essential channels for political news consumption. Consequently, many researchers view social media as a powerful tool for fostering a more participatory democracy.¹⁰ The central argument supporting this perspective is that increased exposure to political information on social media facilitates both explicit and implicit learning, reinforcing existing participatory goals while fostering new ones.¹¹

Academic literature has demonstrated that intentional political news consumption plays a crucial role in political learning¹² and political participation:¹³ using social media to access news significantly increases the likelihood of engaging in uncivil political

⁵ P.J. Conge, "Review of 'The Concept of Political Participation: Toward a Definition', by Samuel H. Barnes, Max Kaase, Joan M. Nelson, John H. Booth, and Mitchell A. Seligson," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1988), pp. 241-249.

⁶ M. Barrett, B. Zani (eds), *Political and Civic Engagement. Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, London–New York, 2014.

⁷ G.G. Albacete, *Young People's Political Participation in Western Europe. Continuity or Generational Change?*, London 2014.

⁸ K. Mossberger, C.J. Tolbert, R.S. McNeal, *Digital Citizenship. The Internet, Society, and Participation*, Cambridge 2007.

⁹ S. Oates, D. Owen, R.K. Gibson, *The Internet and Politics. Citizens, Voters and Activists*, Abingdon 2006.

¹⁰ L. Bode, E.K. Vraga, P. Borah, D.V. Shah, "A New Space for Political Behavior: Political Social Networking and Its Democratic Consequences," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2014), pp. 414-429; J. Matthes, J. Knoll, S. Valenzuela et al., "A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Cross-Cutting Exposure on Political Participation," *Political Communication*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2019), pp. 523-542; H. Knupfer, A. Neureiter, J. Matthes, "From Social Media Diet to Public Riot? Engagement with 'Greenfluencers' and Young Social Media Users' Environmental Activism," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 139 (2023), 107527.

¹¹ J. Knoll, J. Matthes, R. Heiss, "The Social Media Political Participation Model. A Goal Systems Theory Perspective," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2020), pp. 135-156.

¹² S.H. Chaffee, S.F. Kanihan, "Learning about Politics from the Mass Media," *Political Communication*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1997), p. 421-430; K. Kenski, N.J. Stroud, "Connections Between Internet Use and Political Efficacy, Knowledge, and Participation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2006), pp. 173-192; C.S. Park, H. Gil de Zúñiga, "Learning about Politics from Mass Media and Social Media. Moderating Roles of Press Freedom and Public Service Broadcasting in 11 Countries," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2021), pp. 315-335.

¹³ M. Goyanes, P. Borah, H. Gil De Zúñiga, "Social Media Filtering and Democracy. Effects of Social Media News Use and Uncivil Political Discussions on Social Media Unfriending," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 120 (2021), 106759; J. Ohme, "Algorithmic Social Media Use and Its Relationship to Attitude Reinforcement and Issue-Specific Political Participation – The Case of the 2015 European Immigration Movements," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2021), pp. 36-54.

discussion.¹⁴ However, as it seems clear that political news consumption on social networks encourage participation in specific political issues, this is only true when attitudes do not become excessively extreme.¹⁵

Specialized literature on digital news consumption goes beyond the mere impact of political news exposure, delving into the nature of the information consumed online. Algorithmic filtering, echo chambers, and misinformation have become central concerns in internet studies, social network research, and political communication scholarship.

Algorithmic filtering is a content selection mechanism that personalizes the information displayed to users based on their previous online behavior. This process encourages continuous and sometimes involuntary exposure to politically aligned content. Algorithmic exposure correlates with polarization, though evidence remains largely correlational rather than causal.¹⁶ In this context, digital platform algorithms contribute to proactive information exposure in two keyways: (i) by fostering cognitive consonance through the pre-selection of information that aligns with users' previous searches, and (ii) by creating personalized networks that connect individuals based on shared interests, values, and social ties.¹⁷ Consequently, prior engagement with digital platforms influences users' attitudes, but algorithmic systems amplify this effect by curating content designed to maximize engagement.¹⁸ Moreover, algorithmic prescreening significantly increases the volume of information users encounter compared to actively seeking information through offline media sources.¹⁹

The algorithmic selection of content by digital platforms is closely linked to the phenomenon known as echo chambers. This occurs when users' attitudes are reinforced by consuming only politically aligned content, engaging with like-minded individuals, and remaining isolated from opposing perspectives. Two key elements are necessary for an echo chamber to emerge: first, a shared set of beliefs and opinions, and second, a social network structure that facilitates the continuous reinforcement of these beliefs.²⁰

Various studies have found that political discussions on social networks among like-minded individuals are associated with more extreme attitudes compared to those occurring in heterogeneous discussion networks.²¹ A significant body of research has

¹⁴ M. Goyanes, P. Borah, H. Gil De Zúñiga, "Social Media Filtering and Democracy...", 106759.

¹⁵ J. Ohme, "Algorithmic Social Media...", pp. 36-54.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ L.M. Hagen, M. Wieland, A.-M. In der Au, "Algorithmischer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Wie die automatische Selektion im Social Web die politische Kommunikation verändert und welche Gefahren dies birgt," *MedienJournal*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2017), pp. 127-143.

¹⁸ J. Ohme, "Algorithmic Social Media...", pp. 36-54.

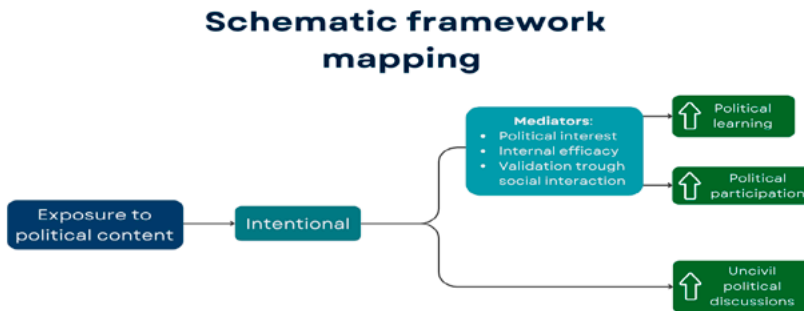
¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ G. De Francisci Morales, C. Monti, M. Starnini, "No Echo in the Chambers of Political Interactions on Reddit," *Scientific Reports*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2021), 2818.

²¹ R. Huckfeldt, J.M. Mendez, "Moths, Flames, and Political Engagement. Managing Disagreement within Communication Networks," *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 70, no. 1 (2008), pp. 83-96.

identified social media as a primary driver of political polarization, often attributing this effect to echo chambers.²² Accordingly, exposure to algorithmically selected political content and interactions with like-minded individuals may act as catalysts for attitude reinforcement, accelerating user radicalization and the adoption of more extreme political positions. While research demonstrates a correlation between algorithmic preselection, echo chambers, and ideological reinforcement, fewer studies specifically examine the process through which individuals transition from moderate to extreme positions over time.

Figure 1. Intentional exposure to political content



Source: own elaboration

Although most researchers have identified echo chambers, repeated interactions with like-minded users, and the isolation of opposing perspectives as primary drivers of political polarization, recent studies have questioned the extent to which these factors contribute to polarization.²³ In this regard, De Francisci Morales, Monti & Starnini's²⁴ findings suggest that polarization is also associated with increased interactions between individuals with opposing viewpoints. Specifically, engaging in discussions with individuals who hold different political opinions can foster political polarization

²² M. Cinelli, G. De Francisci Morales, A. Galeazzi et al., "Echo Chambers on Social Media. A Comparative Analysis," *arXiv*, 2004, 09603.

²³ E. Dubois, G. Blank, "The Echo Chamber Is Overstated. The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media," *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 21, no. 5 (2018), pp. 729-745; A Guess, B. Nyhan, B. Lyons, J. Reifler, "Avoiding the Echo Chamber about Echo Chambers," *Knight Foundation*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-25.

²⁴ G. De Francisci Morales, C. Monti, M. Starnini, "No Echo in the Chambers of Political Interactions...", 2818.

among users. Notably, this relationship between exposure to opposing viewpoints and increased polarization appears to be exclusive to online environments.

Beyond algorithmic mechanisms, online discussions are also shaped by voluntary filtering behaviors, particularly through unfriending. Exposure to uncivil political discussions is a strong predictor of users blocking or unfriending others.²⁵ The potential dangers of a self-reinforcing cycle of ‘unfriending’, wherein users increasingly insulate themselves from politically dissonant perspectives and opposing news sources, is the contribution to the deterioration of an informed and participatory society, as individuals who systematically remove dissenting voices from their social media networks are less likely to be exposed to diverse viewpoints.²⁶ Some studies suggest that polarization can foster political participation: heightened ideological divisions can serve as a catalyst for political engagement,²⁷ since individuals with strong political convictions are more likely to engage in political activities.²⁸ Several studies have found that increased ideological and political polarization can influence citizen participation in politics.²⁹ However, the use of algorithms in social networks may contribute to the political demobilization of groups with more extreme positions, challenging the assumption that polarization inherently leads to increased political engagement.³⁰

A parallel phenomenon that has emerged alongside the dissemination of political information on social networks is the proliferation of deliberately fabricated disinformation aimed at manipulating public opinion. The increasing popularity of online social media has coincided with a surge in disinformation, which is often designed to be more engaging and persuasive than factual information. Disinformation tends to present compelling narratives, whereas factual reporting is often more monothematic.³¹ This distinction makes disinformation particularly appealing to individuals, thereby accelerating its spread. Within online communities, disinformation disseminators actively collaborate in producing and amplifying misleading content, reinforcing its impact on public discourse.³² Disinformation agents do not merely distribute misleading

²⁵ M. Goyanes, P. Borah, H. Gil De Zúñiga, “Social Media Filtering and Democracy...”, 106759.

²⁶ S.W. Yoo, H. Gil De Zúñiga, “The Role of Heterogeneous Political Discussion and Partisanship on the Effects of Incidental News Exposure Online,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2019), pp. 20-35.

²⁷ K. Kenski, N.J. Stroud, “Connections Between Internet Use...,” pp. 173-192.

²⁸ L. Mason, “‘I Disrespectfully Agree’. The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2015), pp. 128-145.

²⁹ T.M. Kleiner, “Does Ideological Polarisation Mobilise Citizens?,” *European Political Science*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2020), pp. 573-602.

³⁰ J. Ohme, “Algorithmic Social Media...,” pp. 36-54.

³¹ T.J. Johnson, R. Wallace, T. Lee, “How Social Media Serve As a Super-Spreader of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Conspiracy Theories Regarding Health Crises,” in J. Harris Lipschultz, K. Freberg, R. Luttrell (eds), *The Emerald Handbook of Computer-Mediated Communication and Social Media*, Leeds 2022, p. 67-84.

³² T. Wilson, K. Starbird, “Cross-Platform Information Operations. Mobilizing Narratives & Building Resilience through Both ‘Big’ & ‘Alt’ Tech,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, vol. 5, no. CSCW2 (2021), pp. 1-32.

content to sway undecided individuals; they also engage in a continuous learning process to refine their tactics and enhance their persuasive impact.³³ These actors actively shape online discussions by acquiring and disseminating new disinformation narratives, making their messages increasingly compelling and difficult to counter.

However, it is essential to recognize that entertainment remains the primary motivation for social media use, making exposure to political news largely incidental.³⁴ Social media use for entertainment can serve as an entry point to political participation if users are incidentally exposed to political content and engage in discussions.³⁵ However, research on incidental exposure to political content has yielded contradictory findings.

On the one hand, studies indicate that incidental news exposure is associated with positive effects, such as increased political knowledge, greater political participation, and enhanced political information-seeking behaviors. For instance, Valeriani & Vaccari³⁶ found that in several European countries, incidental exposure to news via social media correlated with higher levels of political participation, both online and offline. Similarly, other studies suggest that incidental news exposure encourages the consumption of diverse news sources and improves the recognition and retention of political information.³⁷

In contrast, a line of research finds that incidental exposure to news can have negligible or even negative effects on political knowledge, depending on how individuals process the information^{38, 39, 40}. Specifically, Facebook use has been found to correlate negatively with political knowledge acquisition.⁴¹ More nuanced perspectives on the

³³ Y. Shan, "Disinformation in Group Chat Social Media Network," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 231 (2025), 106891.

³⁴ Y. Theocharis, E. Quintelier, "Stimulating Citizenship or Expanding Entertainment? The Effect of Facebook on Adolescent Participation," *New Media & Society*, vol. 18, no. 5 (2016), pp. 817-836.

³⁵ J. Kahne, B. Bowyer, "The Political Significance of Social Media Activity and Social Networks," *Political Communication*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2018), pp. 470-493.

³⁶ A. Valeriani, C. Vaccari, "Accidental Exposure to Politics on Social Media as Online Participation Equalizer in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom," *New Media & Society*, vol. 18, no. 9 (2016), pp. 1857-1874.

³⁷ N. Strauß, B. Huber, H. Gil De Zúñiga, "'Yes, I Saw It – But Didn't Read It...' A Cross-Country Study, Exploring Relationships between Incidental News Exposure and News Use across Platforms," *Digital Journalism*, vol. 8, no. 9 (2020), pp. 1181-1205.

³⁸ A. Oeldorf-Hirsch, "The Role of Engagement in Learning From Active and Incidental News Exposure on Social Media," *Mass Communication and Society*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2018), pp. 225-247.

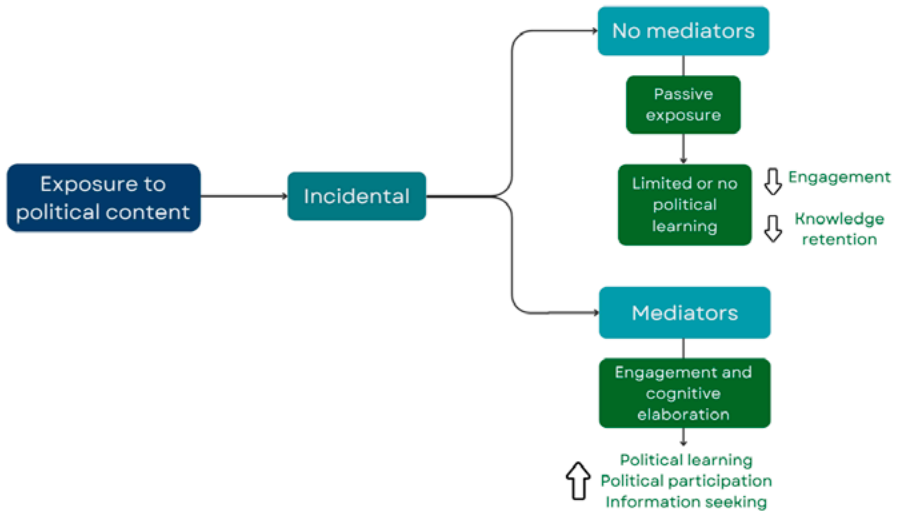
³⁹ P.F. Van Erkel, P. Van Aelst, P. Thijssen, "Does Media Attention Lead to Personal Electoral Success? Differences in Long and Short Campaign Media Effects for Top and Ordinary Political Candidates," *Acta Politica*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2020), pp. 156-174.

⁴⁰ S. Lee, M.X. Xenos, "Social Distraction? Social Media Use and Political Knowledge in Two US Presidential Elections," *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 90 (2019), pp. 18-25.

⁴¹ M.A. Cacciatore, S.K. Yeo, D.A. Scheufele et al., "Is Facebook Making Us Dumber? Exploring Social Media Use as a Predictor of Political Knowledge," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 95, no. 2 (2018), pp. 404-424.

effects of incidental news exposure highlight the varying effects of incidental exposure on political learning. According to Gil de Zúñiga, Borah & Goyanes⁴² the effects of incidental news exposure depend not only on the frequency or volume of exposure but also on how individuals interact with and interpret the information. Such exposure only has a positive impact when mediated by two critical factors: engagement with the information and cognitive elaboration. Only users who actively engage with incidentally encountered news and critically process the information demonstrate improvements in political knowledge. In this sense, individuals primarily oriented towards online entertainment consumption are less likely to be influenced by incidental news exposure.⁴³ The vast amount of content available in the media environment fosters political inactivity or apathy, allowing individuals to avoid news exposure and selectively engage with entertainment content.

Figure 2. Incidental exposure to political knowledge



Source: own elaboration

In this sense, using social media for entertainment purposes is negatively associated with political participation,⁴⁴ since exposure to entertainment content can be distract-

⁴² H. Gil de Zúñiga, P. Borah, M. Goyanes, “How Do People Learn about Politics when Inadvertently Exposed to News? Incidental News Paradoxical Direct and Indirect Effects on Political Knowledge,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 121 (2021), 106803.

⁴³ Y. Kim, H.-T. Chen, y H. Gil De Zúñiga, “Stumbling upon News on the Internet. Effects of Incidental News Exposure and Relative Entertainment Use on Political Engagement,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 29, no. 6 (2013), p. 2614.

⁴⁴ T.P. Bakker, C.H. De Vreese, “Good News for the Future? Young People, Internet Use, and Political Participation,” *Communication Research*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2011), pp. 451-470.

ing in different ways.⁴⁵ First, an entertainment-oriented exposure dampens high-effort forms of political participation over time. So, the more entertainment content consumption the less likely the person will be to engage in political participation activities that require considerable amounts of time and effort. And this is true regardless of the level or frequency of exposure to political content. Second, exposure to political content in social networks directly affects low-effort participation even when the user invests a lot of time in entertainment content.

FROM CLICKS TO ACTION? THE LINK BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE ACTIVISM

The number of mass protests occurring worldwide has steadily increased since 2009, coinciding with a sharp rise in internet usage. This parallel trend has led some researchers to suggest that digital connectivity plays a crucial role in mobilizing protests.⁴⁶ Social networks have been argued to facilitate group formation⁴⁷ and enhance the communication of grievances.⁴⁸ Additionally, these platforms enable rapid communication, which significantly improves protest planning and coordination.⁴⁹

The relationship between conventional and digital activism remains complex. Digital activism is broadly defined as *political participation, activities, and protests organized in digital networks beyond representative politics* by non-state actors.⁵⁰ However, the concept remains contested due to its conceptual vagueness,⁵¹ the notion of 'digital dualism' – the separation of online and offline spheres – as a conceptual fallacy,^{52,53}

⁴⁵ J. Matthes, J. Knoll, S. Valenzuela et al., "A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Cross-Cutting..." pp. 523-542.

⁴⁶ S. J. Brannen, C.S. Haig, K. Schmidt, "The Age of Mass Protests," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2020, at http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200303_MassProtests_V2.pdf, 5 March 2025.

⁴⁷ T.V. Maher, J. Earl, "Barrier or Booster? Digital Media, Social Networks, and Youth Micromobilization," *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 62, no. 6 (2019), pp. 865-883.

⁴⁸ B.G. Smith, S.B. Smith, D. Knighton, "Social Media Dialogues in a Crisis. A Mixed-Methods Approach to Identifying Publics on Social Media," *Public Relations Review*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2018), pp. 562-573.

⁴⁹ H. Gill, H. Rojas, "Communication Mediation Model Predicting Political Participation among Instant Messaging App Users: An OSROR Approach," *Communication Studies*, vol. 72, no. 3 (2021), pp. 490-512.

⁵⁰ A. Karatzogianni, *Firebrand Waves of Digital Activism 1994-2014. The Rise and Spread of Hacktivism and Cyberconflict*, London 2015.

⁵¹ S.M. Özkula, "The Problem of History in Digital Activism. Ideological Narratives in Digital Activism Literature," *First Monday*, vol. 26, no. 8 (2021).

⁵² Ch.R. Foust, K. Drazner Hoyt, "Social Movement 2.0. Integrating and Assessing Scholarship on Social Media and Movement," *Review of Communication*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2018), pp. 37-55.

⁵³ N. Jurgenson, "When Atoms Meet Bits. Social Media, The Mobile Web and Augmented Revolution," *Future Internet*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2012), pp. 83-91.

and warn against the technological determinism implied in some uses of the term.⁵⁴ Moreover, some studies use pejorative forms such as ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’ to describe low-commitment forms of digital activism (e.g., liking or sharing), associated with minimal physical risk and ‘weak ties,’⁵⁵ though growing evidence highlights their potential contribution to broader repertoires of political action.⁵⁶

Over the past decade, extensive research has explored the relationship between online and offline collective action, being a recurring topic of debate in the literature.⁵⁷ Evidence suggests that frequent social media use correlates with online political participation,^{58,59,60} which may in some cases translate into offline collective action.^{61,62,63} Yet this relationship is largely based on cross-sectional findings, so causal interpretations should be made cautiously.

Although an association between online and offline political behavior is observed, the causal directionality remains uncertain. Some studies suggest that online political behavior is merely an extension of offline activism, serving as a means to complement and expand traditional repertoires of political action,^{64,65} stimulating mobilization and leading individuals toward offline political engagement.⁶⁶

⁵⁴ P. Gerbaudo, “From Cyber-Autonomism to Cyber-Populism. An Ideological History of Digital Activism,” *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2017), pp. 477-489.

⁵⁵ D. McCafferty, “Activism vs. Slacktivism,” *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 54, no. 12 (2011), pp. 17-19.

⁵⁶ M. Halupka, “Clicktivism: A Systematic Heuristic,” *Policy & Internet*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2014), 115-132.

⁵⁷ S. Boulianne, Y. Theocharis, “Young People, Digital Media, and Engagement. A Meta-Analysis of Research,” *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2020), , pp. 111-127.

⁵⁸ H. Gil de Zúñiga, L. Molyneux, P. Zheng, “Social Media, Political Expression, and Political Participation. Panel Analysis of Lagged and Concurrent Relationships,” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 64, no. 4 (2014), pp. 612-634.

⁵⁹ S.W. Yoo, H. Gil de Zúñiga, “Connecting Blog, Twitter and Facebook Use with Gaps in Knowledge and Participation,” *Communication & Society*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2014), pp. 33-48.

⁶⁰ H.C. Yang, J.L. DeHart, “Social Media Use and Online Political Participation among College Students during the US Election 2012,” *Social Media+ Society*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2016).

⁶¹ A. Kende, M. Van Zomeren, A. Ujhelyi, N.A. Lantos, “The Social Affirmation Use of Social Media as a Motivator of Collective Action,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 46, no. 8 (2016), pp. 453-469.

⁶² Ö. Odağ, Ö.M. Uluğ, N. Solak, “Everyday I’m Çapulung,” *Journal of Media Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2016), pp. 148-159.

⁶³ D.J. Wilkins, A.G. Livingstone, M. Levine, “All Click, no Action? Online Action, Efficacy Perceptions, and Prior Experience Combine to Affect Future Collective Action,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 91 (2019), , pp. 97-105.

⁶⁴ D.S. Lane, D.H. Kim, S.S. Lee et al, “From Online Disagreement to Offline Action. How Diverse Motivations for Using Social Media Can Increase Political Information Sharing and Catalyze Offline Political Participation,” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2017), 2056305117716274.

⁶⁵ A. Rodríguez-Estrada, C. Muñiz, M. Echeverría, “Relación de la participación política online y offline en el contexto de campañas subnacionales,” *Cuadernos. info*, no. 46 (2020), pp. 1-23.

⁶⁶ M. Zumárraga Espinosa, C. Reyes Valenzuela, C. Carofilis Cedeño, “¿Verdad o ficción? El uso político de las redes sociales en la participación política offline en las elecciones presidenciales en Ecuador,”

Studies from computers science suggest that empirical evidence better supports the reverse causal relationship: collective action predicts an increase in online political participation over time, but the inverse relationship – where online participation influences offline collective action – lacks sufficient evidence.⁶⁷ In this context, Chayinska, Miranda, and González provided evidence of a causal relationship, demonstrating that offline participation can drive online political engagement. Their analysis showed that prior offline collective action was a strong predictor of subsequent online participation, even after controlling for factors such as age, gender, and education level. In contrast, the influence of online participation on offline collective action was found to be statistically non-significant.

The study conducted by Smith et al.⁶⁸ has contributed to advancing knowledge on the causal relationship between online interactions and offline mobilization from the political psychology perspective. Their findings indicate that online actions and interactions – often dismissed as low-cost or trivial – play a crucial role in mobilizing individuals and initiating collective action. However, increasingly posts about political grievances over time alone do not appear to influence their likelihood of participating in protests. Social validation in the form of ‘likes’ on posts about political grievances has been found to be a strong predictor of participation in protests. This aligns with the normative alignment model,⁶⁹ which argues that social interactions must be validated to effectively predict mobilization. Consequently, online social validation appears to be significantly linked to offline protest actions. Recent studies have demonstrated that personal social media platform use – data on activist group affiliations and friendship ties – exhibits a high predictive capacity, enabling the classification of users with remarkable accuracy – up to 96%⁷⁰ as protesters or non-protesters. These findings suggest that an individual’s probability of participating in protests can be significantly influenced by factors such as the density and size of their personal network.

Regardless of whether a causal relationship can be established between online political participation and its offline counterpart, certain attitudinal factors exert a significant mediating effect on the relationship between political social media use and online participation. In some instances, online political activity and interactions can inhibit

Análisis político, 2017, at <https://repositorio.unal.edu.co/handle/unal/68256>, 5 March 2025.

⁶⁷ A. Chayinska, M. Miranda, y M. González, “A Longitudinal Study of the Bidirectional...”

⁶⁸ L.G. Smith, L. Piwek, J. Hinds et al., “Digital Traces of Offline Mobilization,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 125, no. 3 (2023), p. 496.

⁶⁹ E.F. Thomas, C. McGarty, K.I. Mavor, “Transforming ‘Apathy Into Movement’. The Role of Prosocial Emotions in Motivating Action for Social Change,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2009), pp. 310-333.

⁷⁰ E. Kopacheva, M. Fatemi, K. Kucher, “Using Social-Media-Network Ties for Predicting Intended Protest Participation in Russia,” *Online Social Networks and Media*, vol. 37-38 (2023), 100273.

the adoption of similar offline political behaviors,⁷¹ even leading to demobilization,⁷² since internal political efficacy and political interest play crucial roles⁷³ (Zumárraga-Espinosa, 2022). While the political use of digital platforms promotes political knowledge, and there is evidence that social media facilitates emotional contagion,⁷⁴ these impulses do not translate into increased offline political involvement. Additionally, the mechanisms linking online polarization to offline mobilization remain insufficiently defined: the evidence supporting a causal relationship between online polarization and offline mobilization lacks the necessary granularity to establish a clear connection between users' digital interactions and their real-world political behaviors.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

Despite the democratic potential of social media to enhance political participation, our findings align with the broader literature in showing that political engagement in contemporary societies is not necessarily facilitated by these platforms. While digital spaces provide unprecedented opportunities for mobilization, they also introduce significant complexities in political communication and interaction. The distorting effects of algorithmic filtering, echo chambers, and misinformation shape political exposure in ways that hinder meaningful engagement rather than fostering it.

Moreover, the academic literature has yet to uncover the causal mechanisms explaining the interaction between online and offline political participation. This gap in knowledge prevents us from determining whether digital platforms help reproduce existing patterns of political engagement, reinforcing participation gaps rather than democratizing political voices. New research is needed to determine whether social media is contributing to the erosion of citizen influence in contemporary democracies by shaping political participation in ways that ultimately fail to amplify the voices of the broader public.

⁷¹ Y.H. Lee, G. Hsieh, "Does Slacktivism Hurt Activism?. The Effects of Moral Balancing and Consistency in Online Activism," in Y.H. Lee, G. Hsieh, *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Paris 2013, pp. 811-820.

⁷² Sh. Spier, *Collective Action 2.0. The Impact of Social Media on Collective Action*, Cambridge 2017.

⁷³ M. Zumárraga-Espinosa, C. Reyes-Valenzuela, C. Carofilis-Cedeño, "Dimensiones de la participación política offline y online. Factores de primer y segundo orden," *Revista mexicana de ciencias políticas y sociales*, vol. 67, no. 245 (2022), pp. 105-139.

⁷⁴ J. Serrano Puche, "Internet y emociones. Nuevas tendencias en un campo de investigación emergente = Internet and Emotions. New Trends in an Emerging Field of Research," *Comunicar: Revista Científica Iberoamericana de Comunicación y Educación = Scientific Journal of Media Education*, vol. 46, no. 1, (2016), 19-26.

⁷⁵ V.K. Brändle, C. Galpin, H.J. Trenz, "Brexit as 'Politics of Division'. Social Media Campaigning after the Referendum," *Social Movement Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1-2 (2022), pp. 234-253.

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