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George, Cherian; Wen, Nainan; Hao, Xiaoming

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News Consumption and Political and Civic Engagement among Young People

Xiaoming Hao, Nainan Wen & Cherian George^a

Citizens' active participation in a country's political process is a precondition for democracy and at the core of the concept of democracy as a political system (Held, 2006). At the same time, journalism is seen as a pillar for democracy because of its potential in mobilizing the public for political action by providing information as well as a forum for civic debates. Such an assumption is supported by previous research, which showed that news consumption and political engagement were closely related (for a review see Boulianne, 2009).

The effects of journalism, through public consumption of the news, on political participation need to be reexamined for young adults of the 21st century, for whom political participation takes on many forms. Some research on youth and politics shows increasing political apathy among the young, demonstrated by their declining interest in politics, reluctance to engage themselves in political and civic matters, and low turnout for political elections (e.g. Delli Carpini, 2000; Lee & Wei, 2008; Phelps, 2004). Other studies indicate that young people are still interested in public affairs, and that they support the principle and system of elections and other democratic processes (Henn & Foard, 2012). However, they feel frustrated and powerless to influence the decision-making process (Henn & Foard, 2012), and revert to less formal, more direct and individual, non-electoral activities, such as attending a demonstration and signing a petition (Dalton, 2008).

Because of the perceived role of journalism in mobilizing the public for political action, there has been a long interest in examining the relationship between news consumption and political engagement, especially in today's changing media environment. Recent studies on news consumption behavior have indicated that people rely on multiple media platforms, including both traditional and new media, to obtain news (Ahlers, 2006; Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2008).

Given the growing popularity of new media and the central role they play in the social life of the “Internet generation”, it has been suggested that the innovative means of electronic participation facilitated by new media may serve to attract more young people to politics (Coleman & Hall, 2001). In contrast, research shows that the traditional mass media are not effective in promoting political interest among young people today (Bachmann, Kaufhold, Lewis, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010).

Although a range of studies have been carried out to examine the relationships between news consumption via both traditional and new media platforms and various forms of political and civic engagement (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2010; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al, 2009; Quintelier & Hooghe, 2011; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001), findings have not been conclusive. There is not much question about the popularity of the Internet among the young. But its impact on political engagement has been questioned (Eagles & Davidson; 2001; Delli Carpini, 2000), although more scholars see the Internet as having a positive influence (e.g., Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Holt, Shehata, Stromback, & Ljungberg, 2013; Willnat, Wong, Tamam, & Aw, 2013).

This study, carried out through a survey of college students in Singapore, differs from previous studies examining the impact of the Internet on political and civic engagement by focusing on its function as a source of news. To further test the relationship between news consumption and political engagement, and because the Internet and various media associated with it have become increasingly more popular among young people, we included the Internet in the measurement of news consumption. By including the Internet as a news source and comparing it with traditional news media, we aim to find out if the Internet is playing an important role in mobilizing the young for political and civic engagement through its news function. This is particularly pertinent to this study as we examine both online and offline political activities of young people.

In what follows, we will first outline the relevant literature, which will be followed by an explanation of the method employed in this study. Then, we will present our findings to show whether news consumption is associated with young people's political and civic engagement. The final section discusses the implications of the findings.

Media Consumption and Political/Civic Engagement

One of the primary goals of this study is to disentangle the relationship between media consumption and political engagement. So far, the answers are far from conclusive. Some scholars (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008) who see a negative impact of media on political participation are concerned that the media may instigate distrust or cynicism from the audiences, thus alienating them from political or civic activities. For example, Gerbner and his colleagues (1980) believed that the depiction of social reality on television cultivated heavy viewers to perceive a mean world, resulting in a fearful and untrusting public who hesitated to involve themselves with politics. In addition, Putnam (1995) proposed the time replacement theory to explain how media use may impede individuals' political or civic engagement. His argument was built upon the premise that time spent on media without a news focus, such as television viewing, reduced time spent on political and civic activities. Putnam (2000) further argued that time spent with television was responsible for the decline of social capital and civic activities. Milner (2002) suggested that television viewing has replaced newspaper reading and led to a decline in civic literacy.

Contrary to the arguments of Putnam and others, the prevailing view about the impact of media on political participation is positive. Many studies have shown that media use has a positive impact on both political knowledge and political participation (Brynin & Newton, 2003; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Newton, 1999; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001; Weaver

& Drew, 2001; Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006). For ordinary people, mass media serve as the major means to gain political knowledge (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002) as well as a forum for public discussion (Mutz, 2006). The media promote not only an interest in politics but also awareness of other viewpoints and options for involvement. Media consumption and resources of information gathered by individuals also provide the basis for citizens to achieve a common goal and engage in collective action (Shah & Gil de Zuniga, 2008).

It has been argued that media's influence on political engagement varies among different types of media that serve different functions (Shah et al., 2001). The positive impact of newspaper reading on political and civic participation has been consistently found in various studies (McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod et al., 1999; Shah et al., 2001) and shown as significant across all generations, including the youth. When media are compared, newspaper reading was found to be a more significant facilitator of political engagement than television viewing (e.g., Chaffee, Zhao, & Leshner, 1994; Shah et al., 2001). For example, Nah, Veenstra and Shah (2006) showed that newspaper news use was significantly related to face-to-face political discussion, whereas watching television news was not related to face-to-face political discussion. One of the reasons lies in the fact that newspaper reports offer thematic and historical context rather than episodic coverage of news events, and also emphasize complex issues and policies (Iyengar, 1994; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

In addition to the types of medium, studies have also been carried out to examine the content of the medium in explaining the relationship between media consumption and political participation. Findings show that the same medium may lead to different effects when the audience uses it in different ways (McLeod, 2000). For example, watching public affairs programs on television was found to enhance political participation (McLeod et al., 1999, Norris, 1996; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), while watching entertainment television programs was found to depress political participation (Besley, 2006; McLeod et al., 1996).

According to the uses and gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), people use media selectively to satisfy their specific needs, and their motivations for using the media determine the effects of the media (Rubin, 2002). In line with this argument, people access political content to seek information rather than entertainment, and thus are more likely to engage in political affairs (Shah et al., 2001). People may also seek political content for surveillance and guidance. They have more knowledge and discuss more about politics, and are more likely to vote (Shah et al., 2001). However, people who watch entertainment TV programs for the purpose of diversion are less likely to be politically engaged (Putnam, 2000; Shah et al, 2001).

The coming of the Internet age has dramatically changed patterns of news consumption. The Internet has multiplied both the amount and variety of media content available, and helped reduce the costs for ordinary citizens to acquire information and engage themselves in social and political affairs (Tewksbury, 2003). The Internet has provided more opportunities for political participation, including online voting, opinion survey, debating, and blogging (Ward & Vedel, 2006). Therefore, the Internet is seen as a facilitator of the democratic process (Ward & Vendel, 2006).

Findings from more recent empirical research support a positive relationship between the Internet use and political involvement, efficacy, knowledge and participation (e.g., Gil de Zuniga et al, 2009; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Tedeso, 2007; Xenos & Moy, 2007). For example, Xenos and Moy (2007) showed that exposure to campaign information online was positively associated with political information acquisition, and for those who reported higher level of interest in the political campaigns, web use enhanced their likelihood of being involved in civic and political actions. Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) found that Internet users who use the medium for information purposes were more likely to have political trust and engage more in civic matters.

While traditional mass media are not effective in promoting political interest among young people (Acar, 2008; Cohen, 2008), the Internet is more likely to have an impact on political participation in this age group (see Graber, 2001; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Teens and young adults today live online and are often multi-tasking. Research shows greater enthusiasm about online political participation among young people than older people (Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003). They tend to respond to youth-oriented political content that is enriched with interactive, visual-intensive, and game elements (Iyengar & Jackman, 2003). Norris (2005) argued that the Internet tends to attract those who are underrepresented in conventional forms of political participation, thus “mobilizing” latent participants.

Much hope has been pinned on the Internet for its potential to stimulate young people’s interest and participation in political and civic affairs. As young people seem to prefer participation through loose and less hierarchical networks, the Internet is said to promote informal or sub-politics, as opposed to formal politics in the parliamentary realm (Beck, 1992; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005). In this sense, the Internet has revolutionized political participation and communication worldwide (Bentivegna, 2006; Bimber, 1998; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 2011; Norris, 2005; Polat, 2005).

While some online political participation simply model acts in the offline world (Best & Krueger, 2005), more recent research shows that some forms of online participation are taking over their offline counterparts (Vissers & Stolle, 2013). New modes of political participation online include widespread use of humor in political postings; the invisible support for social/political organizations, candidates and goals; wide-reaching mobilization campaigns and politically motivated hacking (Chadwick, 2006; Raine & Smith, 2008; Schlozman et al., 2010; Vitak et al., 2011). These findings have led some scholars to claim that online political participation might be distinct from offline political participation and

requires a completely new and different conceptual and definitional frame (Biber, 2003; Chadwick, 2006).

The suggestion of a positive link between the Internet usage and political/civic participation is not free of challenge. Critics are concerned that seeking entertainment online would deprive young people of the time to follow news (Kraut et al., 1998). Dahlgren (2005) postulated that the Internet use may contribute to the destabilization of the public sphere. Others (e.g., Shah et al., 2005) argued that another potential outcome of this new communication technology is to, at least, supplement and encourage traditional paths of political participation.

In particular, social media have become one major digital source for political information and news (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010). Social media are broadly defined as Internet-related technologies and practices that people use to create, communicate, and share information with others (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012; Boyd, 2008). Research shows that the informational use of social media motivates political and civic engagement (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Skoric & Poor, 2013; Utz, 2009; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). For example, Holt and his colleagues (2013) found that the use of social media for political purposes increased political interest and offline political participation over time. Gil de Zuniga (2012) found that the informational use of SNS for news had a positive association with both online and offline political participation. These findings underscore the potential of digital media, especially interactive media outlets, to mobilize young people into more active engagement with civic and political life.

The Context, Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study was conducted in Singapore. As a small and economically advanced city-state, Singapore enjoys practically universal Internet access among the young. More than 95

percent of individuals aged 15 to 34 had access to computers and the Internet in 2010 (IDA, 2011). Easy access to the Internet has also ensured access to the traditional media as almost all the print publications in Singapore have gone online.

Singapore is characterized as having an underdeveloped and constrained civic society (Soh & Yuen, 2006) and Singaporeans have been described as politically apathetic (e.g., Chan & Wong, 2001; Veloo, 2002; Yap, 2000). Nevertheless, Singaporeans use the Internet as a channel to air political opinion and to organize public gatherings and protests (Skoric, Poor, Liao, & Tang, 2011). While the Internet is yet to reach its full potentials in engaging the Singapore public in political affairs, many scholars (e.g., George, 2010; Kluver & Soon, 2004; Tan, 2003; Yeo, 2003) suggested that the Internet might greatly promote civic and political participation among Singaporeans.

University students are particular relevant for a study not only because they are free of access problems but also because they are the best educated sector of their cohort and more likely to form and express views and get involved in political civic matters. Focusing on university students allows us to better see how young people may access news media and how news consumption may affect their political and civic engagement on a voluntary basis.

The general question this study aims to answer is if and to what extent news consumption affects young people's political and civic engagement. More specifically, we want to see if the consumption of news from different types of media would influence young people's political and civic engagement offline and online in the Singapore context. The Singapore media scene is rather unique in the sense that while the government exerts considerable influence on how the traditional media report news about local politics, the Internet is left more or less free for information and discussion about politics. As a result, the Internet has made a qualitative difference in the extent and nature of political participation in Singapore (George, 2010). In addition, we want to assess the impact of news consumption on

political knowledge, which is considered an important predictor of political engagement (Delli Carpini, & Keeter, 1996; Neuman, 1986; Verba et al., 1997).

Based on past literature, we assume that news consumption is positively associated with offline and online political and civic engagement as well as political knowledge. Therefore, we draw the following three hypotheses about the possible impact of news consumption through various media on offline and online political/civic engagement:

H1: News consumption via the traditional media such as newspaper, television and radio will be positively associated with offline and online political/civic engagement and political knowledge.

H2: News consumption via the Internet will be positively associated with offline and online political/civic engagement and political knowledge.

H3: News consumption via social network sites will be positively associated with offline and online political/civic engagement and political knowledge.

Method

The present study was carried out through a survey of students from a comprehensive university in Singapore in January 2012. The sampled students came from a general education class attended by students from various faculties, including science, engineering, business, humanities and social sciences. All the 900 or so students from the class who are Singapore citizens or permanent residents were invited to participate in the survey and given a link to a website where the survey questionnaire is posted. We excluded international students from the survey because as newcomers to Singapore, international students are unlikely to be familiar with and motivated for local politics. As some of our survey questions specifically address local issues and knowledge, international students would find it hard to answer such questions. The respondents were offered a shopping voucher of SGD \$10 (=USD \$7) as incentive. In the end, we received 397 completed responses, representing a response rate of 44 percent.

Dependent variables

There are three dependent variables in this study—offline political and civic engagement, online political and civic engagement and political knowledge. In line with the literature on how online political participation may differ from offline political participation, we measured the two types of political participation with different sets of variables. We presented respondents a list of 22 activities and asked them to indicate whether they had engaged in each activity within the past six months. Offline political and civic engagement includes 11 activities, such as signing a petition regarding politics or public affairs and joining a student organization, and online political and civic engagement includes 11 activities, such as posting comments on a news website or political blog and submitting a political video to YouTube or similar websites. The 22 indicators were combined into two sets of reliable composite measures for young people’s self-reported offline and online political and civic engagement (offline, $\alpha=.60$, $M=2.07$, $SD=1.70$; online, $\alpha=.66$, $M=2.05$, $SD=1.81$). To measure respondents’ actual political knowledge, we asked participants to answer seven questions about international and regional affairs. We coded whether or not a respondent answered a given question correctly (1=correct answer; 0=incorrect answer or “don’t know”). We then added the scores together to form the indicator for political knowledge.

Independent variables

This study measured five independent variables—consumption of news from both traditional and new media, including newspaper ($M=2.97$, $SD=1.77$), television ($M=3.23$, $SD=1.88$), radio ($M=1.88$, $SD=1.54$), the Internet ($M=4.18$, $SD=1.77$), and social network sites (SNS) ($M=2.95$, $SD=1.00$). Respondents were asked to indicate how much time they spend on various traditional and new media platforms for news on an average weekday. Answer options include (1) none, (2) 1-5 minutes, (3) 6-10 minutes, (4) 11-15 minutes, (5)

16-30 minutes, (6) 31-60 minutes, (7) 61-90 minutes, and (8) more than 90 minutes. The frequency of respondents' news consumption from social network sites was measured as (1) never, (2) sometimes, (3) often, and (4) very often.

Control variables

Demographics such as age, gender and religiosity (i.e., the level of importance of religion in one's life) were recorded as control variables. We also measured a number of variables that may affect the relationship between the respondents' media use and their political and civic engagement, such as their political efficacy and political discussion. Political efficacy is defined as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process" (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187). Among a variety of factors influencing political behaviors, political efficacy is considered one of the most important psychological constructs closely related to political participation (Delli Carpini, 2004; Hoffman & Thomson, 2009; Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zuniga, 2011; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Political efficacy was measured with two questions in this study—"I am knowledgeable enough to participate in politics and community affairs" and "I am better informed about politics and government than most people". The responses were given on a 4-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". A reliability test showed that the two indicators made a reliable composite measure for young people's political efficacy ($\alpha=.71$, $M=4.15$, $SD=1.72$). In addition, we controlled interpersonal communication as a factor that may affect the impact of media usage on political/civic participation. Prior research reported that interpersonal discussion of political issues mediated the effect of media use on political participation in a significant way (McLeod et al., 1999; Tian, 2011; Zhang, 2012). For political discussion, we asked respondents to report how frequently they would talk about politics or current events with friends and family on a four-point scale, ranging from "never" to "very often" ($M=2.25$, $SD=.70$).

Results

The respondents were aged from 20 to 28 ($M=22.57$, $SD=1.40$), with 261 females (65.7%) and 136 males (34.3%). They had studied one to nine semesters in the university ($M=4.86$, $SD=1.80$). The majority of the respondents (87.2%) did not consider themselves as racial or ethnic minorities in Singapore. Most of them (61.2%) reported a religious affiliation.

First, we used descriptive analysis to show the respondents' news consumption habits. The majority of respondents use the Internet as a source for news, with 85.2% of them spending less than one hour and 8.3% more than one hour on Internet news per day. Newspapers and television are functional alternatives to the Internet as news sources for the respondents, of whom 68.9% spend less than one hour reading print news and 71.3% less than one hour watching TV news per day. In comparison, radio is used much less for news, with 63.6% of the respondents not listening to radio news at all and 35% spending less than one hour per day on radio news.

In addition to traditional and online platforms, the respondents also use other channels for news, such as mobile phones, emails and social media. For news, 59.5% have used the mobile phone and 91.9% have used social media. Email is used much less as a source for news, with only 41.2% reporting having used email as a means to get news.

Among the respondents, 13.1% pay a lot of attention to news about politics and current events, 64% pay some attention, and 22.9% pay very little attention or no attention. In addition, 93.7% reported that they have talked about politics and current events offline with family members or friends, while 55.3% have talked about politics and current events on social network sites (SNS).

Second, the descriptive analysis also shows how the respondents engage themselves in offline and online political and civic activities. The levels of respondents' offline political

participation and online political participation are both low. The most common offline political and civic activities respondents engage in include donating money to a charitable cause or organization (58.8%), doing volunteer work (39.4%), and joining student organizations as a member (37.2%). The most prevalent online political and civic activities are watching political videos online (58.5%), communicating with friends, family or colleagues online about politics (42.7%), and visiting the website of a political party or organization (33.7%).

Correlations were run to see how the variables are related (see Table 1). The strongest correlation was found between offline and online political and civic engagement, indicating that offline and online political and civic activities are not necessarily independent of each other. People who are active in the traditional means of political/civic participation are more likely to be engaged in online political/civic activities as well. For this group of young people, political knowledge is related to online political/civic engagement but not with offline political/civic engagement.

Table 1 about here

Political efficacy and political discussion significantly correlated with both offline and online political/civic participation as well as political knowledge. Those who believe they are well informed, capable of political governance and more likely to engage in political discussions tend to participate more in political and civic activities both offline and online and are also politically more knowledgeable.

News consumption in general has a positive impact on political/civic engagement both online and offline, and is more likely to lead to greater political knowledge. News consumption through the printed media or the Internet is related to both offline and online political/civic engagement and political knowledge. Watching television news is related to online political/civic engagement and political knowledge but not to offline political/civic

engagement. News consumption through SNS correlates with offline and online political/civic engagement but not with political knowledge.

Third, we performed three hierarchical multiple regression analyses to examine the influence of various factors on offline and online political/civic engagement and political knowledge (see Table 2). Respondents' age, gender and religiosity were controlled in the first block. Their political efficacy and political discussion were controlled in the second block. Next, respondents' news consumption via print media, television, radio and the Internet was entered in the third block. Finally, SNS news consumption was entered in the fourth block as an independent variable.

Table 2 about here

Among the demographic variables, younger students were found to be more actively engaged in offline activities than their older counterparts, and male respondents showed higher levels of participation and knowledge than females. Religious beliefs are not associated with offline and online political/civic engagement or knowledge about political matters.

No relationship is found between consumption of news through the traditional media and offline and online political/civic engagement and political knowledge, except for a positive association between print news consumption and political knowledge. As a result, H1 cannot be supported other than with regards to the association between print news consumption and political knowledge. In contrast, news consumption through the Internet was found to be significantly associated with both offline and online political/civic engagement as well as political knowledge, especially online participation in political and civic matters. H2 is thus supported.

Finally, we found that news consumption through SNS, even controlling the effects of overall news consumption from both traditional media and the Internet, is significantly

associated with the two forms of political/civic engagement, even though it is not related to political knowledge. Therefore, H3 is partially supported. In addition, both political efficacy and discussion about political and civic matters were found to be significantly associated with both online and offline political/civic engagement as well as political knowledge.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study allowed us to see how university students keep abreast of news events and issues, and how their news consumption may be associated with their participation in political/civic activities. Although we cannot generalize the findings to all young people in Singapore and elsewhere due to the limitation of our sample, what we have found from this elite group of university students is nevertheless significant for understanding the media consumption and political behaviors of other young people who are not handicapped by lack of education or media access.

One notable finding of this study is that for college students, the Internet has surpassed the traditional media as a major source for news even though more than half of our respondents still use the traditional media for news. When it comes to the relationship between news consumption and political/civic activities, the Internet beats the traditional media by a wide margin. This lends support to propositions and research findings about a positive association of Internet use and political/civic participation among Singaporean youth (George, 2010; Kluver & Soon, 2004; Skoric & Kwan, 2011; Tan, 2003; Yeo, 2003).

The fact that news consumption online is more related to the respondents' political and civic engagement than news consumption through the traditional media may be attributed to two factors. First, the Internet is a more convenient medium for university students to access information. Second, the Internet provides more diversified information, especially on political and civic matters, than the traditional media, whose freedom is more likely to be curtailed in Singapore (George, 2012; Rajah, 2012). Although the Singapore government has

made it clear that Internet communication is subject to the same laws that govern offline politics, it has kept its promise of not blocking online political communication.

Our findings should moderate the concerns of those critics who believe that the time spent on the Internet is at the expense of citizens' news consumption and political engagement (Kraut et al., 1998; Putnam, 2000). This study shows that young people today may not be apathetic about politics but are instead engaged politically in a different manner from the past. As heavy users of the Internet, they may prefer to show their interest in and commit themselves to politics online, where they could harness the Internet's convenience and resources to their advantage.

Despite the growth of the Internet as a news source for the young people, the conventional news platforms cannot be simply dismissed for at least two reasons. First, news accessed online will not offer young Internet users an entirely different vision of the world as most of the news available online still comes from the traditional media. Second, this study shows evidence that reading the news from the print media outperforms news consumption over the Internet in making the respondents more politically knowledgeable, which may be directly or indirectly associated with political and civic engagement via political efficacy and political discussion.

It should also be noted here that although this study shows that online news consumption is more likely to explain variations in offline and online political/civic engagement than news consumption through the traditional media, this finding could be due to a limitation in our study design. As we asked the respondents to indicate the frequency but not the types of news, it is not clear if the association found between news consumption through the Internet but not the traditional media on the one hand and offline and online political/civic engagement on the other could be attributed to the possibility that news consumed online is more related to political interest and political/civic matters. Future studies

should examine the type of news consumed, to explore its impact on political/civic engagement.

Another finding that should draw our attention is the role that social media play in the news consumption and political/civic engagement among our respondents. University students no doubt are one of the most active groups of people using social media. While social media are designed and used mainly to build and maintain social networks, the overwhelming majority of our respondents cited them as a source for news. It is unlikely that social media have been used in such a way that they replace the traditional media as a source for news, but the social networks built upon such media may well have become important sources for active users to get major news, which could be easily passed along the social networks through interpersonal communication or mass circulation. While it is debatable whether we should see the link between SNS news consumption and political/civic engagement as a causal relationship or attribute it to the sense of communal life and politics fostered by social networks, we should further explore the role of social media as sources of information, platforms for political discussion, and arenas for political and civic actions.

We also need to give further thought to the correlation between offline and online political/civic participation. What is being done in the real world may or may not be done in the virtual world, or vice versa. In that aspect, online activities have certainly expanded the scope of political/civic participation as argued by Cho and his colleagues (2009). Activities cited in our measurement of the offline vs. online political/civic engagement are mostly different and thus do not allow us to see clearly if the Internet can serve as an additional channel to allow people to engage themselves in the same forms of political/civic activities offline, thus expanding their opportunities to engage themselves in political/civic activities that they may not be able to participate in offline. An analysis of two similar types of activities --- signing petition and donating to charity online and offline --- shows that there is

a weak correlation between offline and online activities in this regard. Although the number of respondents involved in these activities is small, it does allow us to suggest that online activities have not only allowed people to engage in new forms of political/civic activities, but also facilitate people to participate in political/civic activities that they may not participate in offline. This could be due to the suppressed environment on traditional media platforms in Singapore, the ease and convenience of the Internet, the anonymity provided by the Internet or other reasons.

While Singaporeans have been described as politically apathetic (e.g, Chan & Wong, 2001; Veloo, 2002; Yap, 2000), young respondents in this study exhibited a certain level of interest in politics and political discussions. This result is consistent with a more recent survey (Tan, Chung & Zhang, 2011), which shows that young Singaporeans are actually less apathetic about politics than older Singaporeans as they participate more in politics and are more likely to read about politics from both the traditional media and the Internet. This is certainly good news for a country that has been described as having an underdeveloped and constrained civic society (Soh & Yuen, 2006) despite its achievements economically and otherwise. Furthermore, our study shows that the variation in our young respondents' political knowledge as well as in offline and online political/civic engagement can be partially explained by their active consumption of news, especially news consumed online. Therefore, it would be wise to emphasize the relevance of the online activities when examining political participation in Singapore, where the authoritarian orientation is readily visible (Zhang, 2012). The fact that the traditional media are heavily influenced by the government but the media associated with the Internet are more or less left free may explain why college students are so active in online news consumption and political/civic engagement.

The theoretical assumptions about the relationship between news consumption and

civic/political engagement used in this study are no different from those underlying research examining Western representative democracies, but the practicality of these assumptions may vary in the Singapore context. There is no question that the impact of news consumption on civic/political engagement in many of the Asian countries is limited by government control of the media, but the development of new communication technologies has greatly enhanced people's power in sharing news and information. In Singapore's neighboring countries, such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia, the rise of democratic movements has been partly attributed to the development of new communication technologies (Aspinall, 1999; Hill & Sen, 2000; Nain, 2002; Siriyuvasak, 2005). The fact that no similar movements have arisen in Singapore, despite its greatly superior deployment of online and mobile technologies, shows the relationship between news consumption and civic/political engagement is very much mediated by the local context.

More evidence that technological advances may be used to adapt to rather than fundamentally change the local environment can be found in how our respondents use the Internet for political and civic engagement. They are more likely to engage in passive forms of political participation, such as watching political videos and visiting political websites, than actions that require personal initiative, such as posting comments on political websites, contacting politicians and submitting political videos online. Despite easy online access to the government, only a small minority of our respondents have actually signed a petition or written to a politician or government official. Such a preference to act as consumers rather than producers of political activities might be described as "slacktivism" (Morozov, 2011). In addition, our findings show that the respondents are more willing to talk politics and share political content among friends and family online than to express their views to policy makers and the wider public, despite how simple it is to do so through the Internet.

In conclusion, we can say that the Internet and various social media associated with it

have greatly increased the capacity of young Singaporeans to consume the news and participate in a greater variety of political and civic activities. In this regard, new media could be said to have brought about a qualitative difference in terms of information sharing and political participation. However, the usage of these new media for political participation is still very much restricted by the local political structure and culture.

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Table 1. Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Offline political/civic	1.00												

engagement													
2. Online political/civic engagement	.412 ***	1.00 0											
3. Political knowledge	.084 #	.199 ***	1.00 0										
4. Age	-.071 #	.097 *	.125 **	1.00 0									
5. Sex	-.077 #	-.161 ***	-.234 ***	-.579 ***	1.00 0								
6. Religiosity	-.005	-.030	.050	-.018	.022	1.00 0							
7. Political efficacy	.214 ***	.270 ***	.182 ***	.097 *	.174 ***	.017	1.00 0						
8. Political talk	.166 ***	.368 ***	.189 ***	.066 #	-.127 **	.018	.351 ***	1.00 0					
9. Printed news consumption	.084 *	.118 **	.221 ***	.104 *	-.097 *	.060	.150 ***	.166 ***	1.00 0				
10. Television news consumption	.030	.122 **	.145 **	.035	-.015	.072 #	.065	.193 ***	.342 ***	1.00 0			
11. Radio news consumption	.042	.040	.055	.076 #	-.132 **	.139 **	.021	.152 ***	.182 ***	.193 ***	1.00 0		
12. Internet news consumption	.182 ***	.320 ***	.235 ***	.141 **	-.255 ***	-.021	.223 ***	.239 ***	.157 ***	.167 ***	.054	1.00 0	
13. SNS news consumption	.195 ***	.288 ***	-.034	-.075 #	.041	-.042	.158 ***	.149 ***	-.083 *	.039	.009	.248 ***	1.00 0

$p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Standardized Linear Regression Coefficients for Political Participation, Political Knowledge, and Social Media Usage for Political Discussion (N = 407)

	Offline political/civic engagement	Online political/civic engagement	Political knowledge
Demographic variables			
Age	-.18**	.006	-.02
Gender (1=male, 2=female)	-.18**	-.16**	-.25***
Religiosity	-.004	-.03	.06
R ² change	.03*	.03*	.06***
Control variables			
Political efficacy	.17***	.15**	.10*
Political discussion	.10*	.31***	.13*
R ² change	.05***	.14***	.03***
Media news consumption			
Print	.04	.01	.15**
Television	-.03	.03	.06
Radio	.02	-.03	-.03
Internet	.13*	.21***	.13*
R ² change	.02	.04***	.05***
SNS news consumption			
	.14**	.20***	-.08
R ² change	.02**	.04***	.006
Total adjusted R ²	.09**	.23***	.12
df	386	386	386
F-value	7.58**	18.70***	2.59

#p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001