

Political talk on Facebook mirrors political talk offline

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Political discussions conducted on social networking sites like Facebook mirror traditional offline discussions and don't provide a window into previously untapped participants in the political process, according to a new study that includes two University of Kansas researchers.

"Social networking is important, but what we've shown in [political science](#) is that the people who are using the Internet, be it Facebook, Twitter or whatever else for political activities, are really the same people who are politically active offline anyway," said Patrick Miller, a KU assistant professor of political science and the study's lead author. "There are not very many people who are political animals online but not in the real world."

The study, published in the journal *Political Research Quarterly*, involved a survey of discussions conducted in 2010 on Facebook and offline among students at the College of William & Mary while a fellow student ran for city council in Williamsburg, Va.

"It's just another piece of evidence to show that social media isn't the be-all and end-all. It is revolutionary in some aspects but at the same time people bring to social media the way that they behave everywhere else," said co-author Peter Bobkowski, a KU assistant professor of journalism. "It's a reflection of how people behave in various other settings, and so I think it's a sobering reminder of the limits of social media, especially from people who try to bet a lot on it, whether it's in political campaigns or various other ways that people try to spread messages."

However, Miller and Bobkowski said the study does provide some insight into how different people use social media and how people are discussing politics among their social ties.

Better-connected Facebook users or "friend collectors" who have lots of direct social ties are more uncomfortable talking with people whose political views they disagree with or are unfamiliar with, Miller said. These users said they were more likely to tailor their Facebook privacy settings so that friends who disagreed with them politically could not see their political status updates or political discussions. They were also more likely to hide parts of their profiles with political content from friends with different political opinions.

"For the friend collector, Facebook is just an echo chamber where they're choosing to engage with like-minded people and having those opinions reinforced," Miller said.

Bobkowski said these users are less likely to express a politically risky opinion.

"These people might be very expressive about anything else except for things that might threaten their position or might shrink their network," he said.

However, "gatekeepers" who connect groups of people who are otherwise not connected to each other were more comfortable discussing politics on Facebook with friends who had different political opinions. Someone in that role might be the lone social link connecting the otherwise polarized College Democrats and College Republicans, or the friend who connects students in one dorm with students in another dorm across campus.

"Their job in the social fabric of a community is to connect people who

don't know each other. They are probably more used to navigating diversity and relaying information from one type of person to another," Miller said, "so they're more comfortable with managing risky discussion topics."

In another major difference among the two types of users, friend collectors were involved in more interactivity such as commenting on or liking their friends' posts. Gatekeepers were more likely to use Facebook to politically persuade their friends, even though they engaged in less back-and-forth than friend collectors in those conversations. In essence, friend collectors were using Facebook to engage more deeply with friends who had similar opinions, whereas gatekeepers were more likely to use Facebook just to voice their opinion without actually interacting with friends.

Even though the study found that social media platforms don't break new ground among political discussion forums, it still could benefit political strategists if they have a way to target gatekeepers.

"Facebook as a political strategy is vastly over-rated. Social media is not effective at mobilizing people who would not otherwise be politically motivated," Miller said. "It doesn't persuade people to vote for you and it doesn't get out the vote by itself. But if a campaign could somehow know who are those social connectors out there, then those are the people they should use to disseminate their messages. The strategic problem for a campaign is the almost impossible task of knowing who those gatekeepers are."

Bobkowski said the next step in the research would be to examine how [social media](#) users treat the content of different types of political messages and how likely they would be to share or post them.

Provided by University of Kansas

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