

## Research Statement

My research focuses on how advances in communication technology impact the goals of diversity and equality associated with “deliberative” and “participative” models of democracy. This focus was perhaps first inspired by Habermas’s (1989) romantic yet tragic vision of the “classic public sphere” and the initial hope among observers that the Internet might somehow come to its rescue. My attraction to this vision remains, but in some ways my work has been about its reconciliation, not only with the flaws inherent in the classic public sphere model itself, but with the empirical realities of social structures and human psychology. I find the endeavor to understand the challenges democracies face a hopeful one, however. My most significant studies<sup>1</sup> use survey and content analysis, as well as theory-based methods, to assess the influence of the contemporary media environment on (1) selective exposure to diverse and cognitively complex political perspectives and (2) on the equality and quality of political participation processes.

### Exposure to Diverse and Cognitively Complex Political Perspectives

In several articles ( [REDACTED] 2010a; Brundidge & Cao, under review; [REDACTED] Garrett, Rojas, & Gil de Zúñiga, in press; [REDACTED] Reid, Muddiman, & Choi, revise and resubmit) and two book chapters ([REDACTED] & Rice, 2009; [REDACTED] in press) I examine the extent to which people are exposed to political diversity online and its democratic implications. My most prominent peer-reviewed journal articles in this area are discussed below.

In one article, awarded best faculty paper in the UT College of Communication (the *Ellen A. Wartella, Distinguished Research Award*) and published in the *Journal of Communication* ([REDACTED] 2010)<sup>2</sup>, I theorize that due to a combination of (1) psychological and structural limitations on individual-level selective exposure processes and (2) “weakened social boundaries” in the contemporary public sphere, online mechanisms should slightly increase the heterogeneity of people’s political discussion networks, *if only by contributing to their inadvertent encounters with non-likeminded others*. In support, analyses of nationally representative survey data found that above and beyond traditional media use and “face-to-face” discussion mechanisms, online political discussion (directly) and online news (both directly and indirectly through political discussion) made small yet significant contributions to overall heterogeneity of people’s discussion networks. Importantly, however, partisanship undermined some of these effects. This study was the first to find a relationship, positive or negative, between Internet use and people’s overall experience of political diversity, providing an initial answer to a question that had been debated theoretically for years.

In a second study ([REDACTED] Garrett, Rojas, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014), published in *Mass Communication and Society*, my coauthors and I examine the participatory consequences of exposure to ideological online news outlets, such as political blogs. We hypothesize that the posting of “comments” as a form of political discussion leads to *differential gains* (see Scheufele, 2002) in political participation for people who use pro-attitudinal outlets, but *differential losses* in participation for those who use counter-

<sup>1</sup> All journals I have published in are refereed and ranked according to impact factor in the Social Science Citation Index (ISI)

<sup>2</sup> International Communication Association Flagship Journal

attitudinal (i.e., “cross-cutting” news sites). We test these hypotheses utilizing two independently collected and U.S. nationally representative survey datasets. The results are intriguing, though not entirely anticipated: across both datasets, we found evidence of differential losses, but *not* of differential gains. We conclude that online commenting does little to augment feelings of homophily fostered in pro-attitudinal sites, but may amplify demobilizing feelings, such as ambivalence, induced by exposure to counter-attitudinal sites.

A third article ( [REDACTED] Reid, Choi, & Muddiman, 2014) published in *Political Psychology*<sup>3</sup>, reflects my recent interest in the concept of *cognitive complexity*. In this study my coauthors and I look specifically at *integrative complexity*, defined as the degree to which diverse viewpoints are recognized in a political argument and ultimately, reconciled or “integrated” with one another. We use the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) program to measure the level of integrative complexity as linguistically reflected in 528 posts sampled from prominent U.S. political blogs. Because there are numerous requirements for the valid measurement of integrative complexity, the data collection process was extremely involved and time intensive.

We found that relative to liberal bloggers, conservative bloggers used more integratively simple language, in part as a function of their more hierarchal approach toward opinion leadership. These findings suggest that the blogosphere is not uniformly non-deliberative—on occasion, its left wing acknowledges and integrates multiple sides of political arguments, while its right wing is less likely to do so. Yet, to the extent that conservatives and liberals are selectively exposed to divergent cognitive-linguistic styles, communication may be increasingly difficult across partisan lines. This form of polarization, may be equally, if not more troubling than the polarization of policy preferences. This study is the first to demonstrate an ideologically rooted “deliberative digital divide.”<sup>23</sup>

### **The Equality and Quality of Political Participation**

In another, though related line of research ([REDACTED] 2010a; 2010b; [REDACTED] Baek, Johnson, & Williams, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Bachman, Hsu, & [REDACTED] 2013), I look at how changes in the media environment are reflected in the equality and quality of democratic processes, such as political participation and expression. Below, I discuss two related peer reviewed journal articles.

In a theory piece ([REDACTED] 2010a), published in the *International Journal of Communication*, I argue that the “structural” and “psychological realms” of the contemporary public sphere do not increase its accessibility, but that once access is attained, increased “traversability” occurs as political discussion and news use become tightly bound in time and space, allowing for more seamless travel between the two categories of discourse. Yet traversability may also lead to less civil and “off the cuff” political talk—civic culture has powerful sway over the extent to which traversability is helpful or harmful to democratic norms. I conclude with a model of accessibility and traversability as they exist in three key historical moments—the “classic public sphere,” the “Industrial Age public sphere,” and the “Information Age public sphere.”

A second article ([REDACTED] Baek, Johnson, & Williams, 2013), published in *Sex*

<sup>3</sup> *Political Psychology* is the International Society of Political Psychology’s Flagship Journal. ISI Ranked 30/157 in Political Science

*Roles: A Journal of Research*<sup>4</sup>, uses nationally representative data from the Pew Internet and Civic Engagement Survey to examine the issue of equality as it relates to “gender gaps” in the contacting of public officials. In contrast with previous research, which examined an earlier, more male dominated Internet, we found that gender gaps are actually smaller in the online context than the offline context. We also found that women’s political uses of social networking sites dramatically augments the frequency with which they sign online petitions, but lessens the frequency with which they engage in more traditional, offline forms of contact, such as letter writing. Thus, in some ways the situation for women in the U.S. appears to have improved. The Internet provides a productive avenue for the contacting of public officials, which could strengthen the extent to which women’s political concerns are voiced. However, women’s shift away from traditional forms of contacting public officials may be problematic for their representation, depending on how women’s political participation continues to take shape and the forums in which representatives are most likely to listen to them.

#### Other Topics and Future Research

Beyond my two main areas of research, I have also coauthored on publications that speak to my wider interests in media and society, including experimental studies on the “third person effect” (Reid, Byrne, ██████████ Shoham, & Marlow, 2007) and “priming” (Bimber, ██████████ Conroy, & Lively, 2013). As indicated by my most recent research, under review and in progress, I am currently intrigued by the impact of the polarized media environment on the ability of citizens to think and communicate in cognitively complex terms.

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<sup>4</sup> *Sex Roles* is ISI ranked #1 in Women’s Studies and #10 in Social Psychology for number of citations

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