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Political Engagement During a Presidential Election Year: A Case Study of Media Literacy Students

Elia Powers¹, Susan Moeller² & Yacong Yuan²

¹*Towson University MD*

²*University of Maryland, College Park*

Abstract

This exploratory, mixed-methods study uses data gathered during the previous U.S. presidential election in 2012 to evaluate student political engagement and digital culture. Survey results and media diary entries revealed that college students enrolled in a media literacy course during Super Tuesday or Election Day gravitated toward low-barrier political actions and expressive modes of citizenship, and they were most engaged when there was a social component to following election news. These results, coupled with recent data on political engagement and media consumption, present an opportunity to consider the role of digital platforms and online communities in the 2016 election.

Keywords: politics, political engagement, citizenship, elections, social media, digital media, news

A central tenet of media literacy education is that it both “develops informed, reflective and engaged participants for a democratic society” and “promotes student interest in news and current events as a dimension of citizenship” (“Core Principles” 2007). Educators in the field commonly teach their students about the impact of media on politics and the concomitant influence of politics on the media. It is evident, therefore, that media literacy instructors stand to benefit from information about how students participate in the political process – such data would allow them to better spark class discussions and craft lesson plans.

This study uses data gathered during the previous U.S. presidential election in 2012 to evaluate student political engagement and digital culture, and to help frame the upcoming 2016 general election. With crowded ballots and ceaseless press coverage, presidential election seasons offer educators unparalleled opportunities to research the engagement of young people in political and civic life. The 2016 election is no exception, with both major political parties wrapping up contested and highly charged primaries, the balance of power up for grabs in Congress and statehouses, and high-profile initiatives and referenda on ballots across the country. On their way to becoming the presumptive presidential nominees, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump faced a barrage of media attention and challenges from chief rivals Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz. As Sanders’ surprisingly strong candidacy showed, young adults are a pivotal demographic: their engagement – or lack thereof – influences both the political conversation and the outcome of the party primaries and the general election.

How political are young voters today? Half of all U.S. millennials describe themselves as having no party affiliation (Drake 2014). They are the likeliest of any age group to not identify with either political party, although those who do are largely Democrats (Newport 2014). A recent study noted, “Millennials have fewer

attachments to traditional political and religious institutions, but they connect to personalized networks of friends, colleagues and affinity groups through social and digital media (Drake 2014, 1).”

Just as political pundits dubbed 2008 the “Facebook election” (Dutta and Fraser 2008) and 2012 the “Twitter election” (Mills 2012), 2016 has been called the “Snapchat election” (Mahler 2015), the “Instagram election” (Schwarz 2015), and the “Periscope election” (Warren 2015). These monikers, along with recent research and news reports, capture the changing ways in which political messages reach young media consumers. Taken together, they are a testament to the growth of curated user-generated content, photo sharing, and live streaming on social media platforms popular with young people (Mahler 2015), and to growing recognition by politicians and political parties that these platforms are the best ways to reach young voters (Chittal 2015; Moody 2015). One interpretation of youth’s turn to social media, especially on mobile platforms, for news and information is that there is a growing thirst for digital community building, social sharing, and peer-to-peer discussions. But recent studies and press coverage do not provide sufficient details about how young people actually *engage* with politics – or even *define* politics.

In this exploratory, mixed-methods study, two cohorts of college students (n=284) enrolled in a general education media literacy course completed an online survey and wrote time-stamped diaries chronicling the ways in which they engaged with politics around Election Day (fall students) and Super Tuesday (spring students), when the greatest number of states hold elections for delegates to the national conventions. Researchers selected these two major political events because they are typically the apex of the primary and general election cycles, respectively, when press coverage is at its height and students may be most likely to engage with politics.

In 2012, Super Tuesday occurred on March 6, and 419 delegates to the Republican convention (almost one-fifth of the total) were in play in 10 states.ⁱ Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, led in the delegate count among the Republican candidates going into Super Tuesday, yet he remained in contention with several other candidates for the party’s nomination. Election Day 2012 took place eight months later on November 6. In the final days before the November election, most U.S. news outlets reported that the election was too close to call, showing Republican candidate Romney and President Barack Obama tied within the margin of error in the popular vote.ⁱⁱ

Interest in following news about candidates for the presidency tends to spike in the days before an election, with the spike being higher around the presidential election than Super Tuesday (Kohut and Remez 2012). For this reason, researchers expected that student engagement with politics would be greater in the period immediately surrounding the definitive November election than during the incrementally important primary season – particularly in a year in which only the Republican Party took part in Super Tuesday. While this study makes no claim of comparing equivalent political events or participants, it captures the ways in which college students enrolled in the same media literacy course during the same calendar year demonstrated their engagement – or disengagement – during the last presidential election cycle.

These results, coupled with recent data on political engagement and media consumption, present an opportunity to consider the role of digital platforms, mobile technologies, online communities, and issues of salience to youth in the 2016 election. What recent media trends have changed the ways in which students may consume and share political news? How have media organizations and politicians responded to lessons learned from the 2012 election in devising strategies to reach young audiences and potential voters? How can media literacy educators use data from this study and elsewhere to understand patterns of student political engagement?

Literature Review

Engagement with Politics

Research shows that civic participation among college-aged students triggers engagement over a lifetime (Jennings and Stoker 2004). Interest in this age group reflects the concern that low levels of

engagement in young adults could spell trouble for the future of civic life. In the years since Putnam (1995) outlined the consequences of diminishing social capital among American youth, scholars have paid close attention to youth political engagement. Social scientists have long measured political engagement through rates of voter turnout, volunteerism, and group membership, all of which fit within the “dutiful citizen” model – joining with others in sanctioned civic activities and organizations (Bennett and Wells 2009). By these measures, young people have become increasingly engaged in politics in recent presidential elections, even if their engagement levels are consistently below that of older generations (“Millennials Talk Politics” 2007; “Civic Health Index” 2008). Turnout for 18 to 29 year olds, after bottoming out at 37% in 1996, has risen in each subsequent presidential election, reaching roughly 50% in both 2008 and 2012 (“Youth Turnout” 2012). In the 2016 primaries, young people (ages 17-29) voted in the Republican contests in record numbers and overwhelmingly supported Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton in Democratic contests (CIRCLE 2016). As other proxies, more college students volunteer now than a generation ago (“Understanding a Diverse Generation” 2011). At least three-quarters of people ages 18-29 participated in civic activities such as attending community meetings and assuming leadership roles in both 2008 and 2010.ⁱⁱⁱ

For many young people, however, the “dutiful citizen” ideal is “neither practicable nor attractive” (Bennett and Wells 2009, 8). Rather, they are engaged in expressive modes of citizenship that often take place online (Bennett and Wells 2009), such as joining a Facebook group or signing an online petition. Pew (“Social Media” 2012) found that Internet users under 30 who used social media for civic purposes most commonly “liked” or promoted political material, posted thoughts on political issues, and encouraged others to act.^{iv} Nearly one-quarter of registered voters ages 18 to 29 follow candidates for political office, political parties, or elected officials on social networking sites (Smith 2014). Studies have found a positive relationship between social media use and political engagement among young people (Boulianne, 2015; Xenos, Vromen, Loader 2014; Smith 2014)

Engagement with personal networks is a form of expressive citizenship. Scholars (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Herr, Kardes and Kim 1991; Lam and Mizerski 2005) have long noted the influence of interpersonal networks in assessing information, and forming opinions about political issues and candidates. Zhang et al. (2010) found that interpersonal discussion fosters political and civic participation. Interpersonal relationships also play a large role in determining political information that young people access (Kushin and Yamamoto 2010) and help shape their political attitudes and voting patterns (McDevitt and Kioussis 2007; “Power of the Ask” 2012).

Election night provides the necessary drama to turn political participation into a social event, with groups gathered in front of televisions to watch the horserace unfold and with social media at their fingertips. The gathering ritual also takes place in front of smaller screens, as people in remote locations communicate in real-time. This communication can create a sense of connectedness – a shared social experience among members of a personal network – that is a hallmark of the social presence theory (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976).

Wellman et al. (2001) made a distinction between participatory capital – a concept similar to dutiful engagement that includes involvement in politics and voluntary organizations – and network capital – relationships with friends, neighbors, and relatives that provide a sense of belonging. They suggested that a perceived decline in social capital may be due to community being embedded in social networks rather than groups. “Rather than distinct online and offline spheres, people are using whatever means are appropriate and available at the moment to participate in organizations and politics” (Wellman et al. 2001, 450).

Media learning often takes place “as a participatory, social process” (Martens 2010, 15). This study builds on existing literature about the influence of personal networks in the political process and the need for connectedness by providing nuanced accounts from students about the social aspects of their engagement with politics at election time. This study measures students’ engagement as “dutiful citizens,” using indicators such as voter turnout, membership in political groups, and volunteering, and as “expressive citizens,” with indicators such as signing a petition, starting or joining a Facebook group for a cause, or displaying a political sign or button.

Engagement with Political News

The rise of social media and popularity of mobile devices have altered the ways in which young people engage with political news. The majority of wired young Americans access the web via mobile devices and receive news about current events and politics online (Lenhart et al. 2010). The expansion of media sources and ubiquity of communication devices make it easier than ever to track and share news. Still, young people continue to spend less time with news than any other age group (“Changing News Landscape” 2012). The percentage of 18- to 29-year-olds (43%) who said in 2012 that they “very” or “somewhat closely” follow news about political figures and events in Washington was not only the lowest of any age group, it was lowest percentage for that age group in recent decades (Mitchell, Gottfried and Matsa 2015).

Media consumers often adopt what Schudson (1999) called a “monitorial mindset,” sorting through a large volume of content, maintaining peripheral awareness of most information, and investing time into topics that are personally relevant. Palfrey (2006) described the news consumption process for digital natives as grazing (scanning a range of sources), deep diving (closer reading for context), and the feedback loop (engaging more meaningfully by blogging, forwarding information, commenting, etc.) Despite the low barriers of entry to creating and sharing content in the digital age, many online users are observers rather than participants (Palfrey, 2006; Hargittai and Walejko 2008). However, more than any other age group, Internet users under 30 post videos and photos online (“Social Currency Online” 2012).

Media literacy education recognizes that “evolving media forms require new instructional approaches and practices” (“Core Principles” 2007). This study provides a window into students’ use of media to follow (and sometimes share) political news at election time – data that may inform media literacy educators’ approaches to teaching units on media and politics in the digital age. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

- RQ1:** To what extent are media literacy students engaged in politics during a presidential election year?
- RQ2:** How do students demonstrate dutiful and expressive forms of political engagement?
- RQ3:** How do students use traditional and new media to track and share political news?

Research Methods

Approach. This exploratory study included a 20-question online survey that measured students’ political engagement and news consumption habits. In online diary entries, students reported on when they tuned into election coverage, how they received their information (what news sources or media platforms), what the general content of the news was, and with whom (if anyone) they shared the information. Diary entries allowed students to explain the social aspects of their political news engagement – specifically when they discussed politics with people in their personal networks and in what setting.

Participants. Undergraduate students in a general education media literacy course taught by the co-authors of this study served as participants^v. The course is offered to a cross-section of 200 students each fall and spring semester. Journalism majors represent a minority of students in the course, and most students are critically examining media for the first time in a school setting.

Procedure. The lead researcher introduced students to the study several weeks in advance of Super Tuesday (spring) or Election Day (fall). Instructions defined political news broadly as “not just what happens in the election/campaign but also issues such as health care, the economy, tax policy, etc.” Students were informed that they should not alter their typical routine of political engagement if they decided to participate in the study.

Students wrote time-stamped diary entries on an online course site summarizing their engagement with political news over the previous three hours – or in the case of the Tuesday and Wednesday morning posts the past 12 hours (including overnight). In all, students wrote 10 entries: four on the Monday before Super

Tuesday (or the November election), four on the Tuesday primary (or Election Day) and two on Wednesday, the day following the primary (or the day following the general election). After students completed the diary entries, they received the survey link.

Data Analysis. Survey data was analyzed using SPSS software. Researchers reviewed the diary entries using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) qualitative coding approach. During the open coding phase, researchers read through the dataset and found patterns in the ways in which students discussed their political engagement. The researchers conceptualized and developed initial categories and in the axial phase of coding refined the categories so that they represented the breadth of students' comments. During the selective coding stage, researchers finalized and provided operational definitions for each category. Two researchers then coded the entire dataset, discussed discrepancies, and agreed upon results.

Results

More students completed both parts of the study and agreed to have their data reported in the fall semester ($n=157$) than in the spring semester ($n=127$). Participants' gender held consistent across semesters – 56% male to 44% female in spring compared with 55% male and 45% female in fall. The vast majority of participants were freshmen or sophomores (81% spring; 72% fall). Democrats (32% spring; 50% fall) outnumbered Republicans (19% spring; 14% fall) and Independents (18% spring; 17% fall). Journalism/communication majors were a minority of the sample (15% spring; 24% fall).

RQ1 asked: To what extent are media literacy students engaged in politics during a presidential election year? Fall students participating in this study during the height of the general election campaign were more engaged across all measures than spring students participating during the height of the primary season.

Interest in Politics and Elections

Survey results found that spring students were less interested in politics ($M=3.22^{vi}$, $SD=1.22$) than fall students ($M=3.57$, $SD=1.12$). Spring students were more often “very disinterested” (13%) than “very interested” (11%) in politics, while the opposite was true in fall (19% “very interested”; 6% “very disinterested”). Just 18% of spring students said they were at least “somewhat interested” in Super Tuesday ($M=2.58$, $SD=1.03$). Many said it was simply too early in the campaign cycle to pay attention and that they had no personal investment in election results. However, 73% said they were at least “somewhat interested” in the 2012 presidential election that fall.

Fall students were most interested in the presidential election (74% “at least somewhat interested”; $M=4.04$, $SD=1.24$), followed by ballot initiatives/measures/referenda (69% “at least somewhat interested”; $M=3.8$, $SD=1.24$). Survey results showed that social issues and the economy/jobs were the issues most commonly tracked and discussed by students over the three-day study. Fall students showed less interest in U.S. House and Senate races (45% “at least somewhat interested”; $M=3.15$, $SD=1.17$) and state/local races (42% “at least somewhat interested”; $M=3.12$, $SD=1.13$).

Time Spent Tracking Political News

More than half (59%) of spring students said they spent 30 minutes or less over the three-day period surrounding Super Tuesday tracking political news, and more than one-third (35%) spent 15 minutes or less. In stark contrast, more than half (60%) of fall students said they spent two hours or more following political news the day before, the day of, and the day after Election Day. Nearly one-fourth (24%) spent between three and five hours tracking political news and 21% spent five hours or more.

RQ2 asked: How do students demonstrate dutiful and expressive forms of political engagement? Results show that students engaged more through expressive than dutiful modes of citizenship, largely thanks

to opportunities to connect with people in their personal networks through social media, digital technologies, and election watch parties.

Dutiful Forms of Political Engagement

The majority of both spring (60%) and fall (81%) students reported that they were registered to vote. Only 6% of spring students said they lived in a state that held its primary vote on Super Tuesday, and only 2% reported that they had voted in a Republican presidential primary or caucus on Super Tuesday, although 17% said they had voted or were planning to vote in a Republican presidential primary or caucus during election season. Seventy-two percent of fall students voted in the presidential election.

Few students had ever demonstrated dutiful political engagement by attending a government meeting (14% spring; 20% fall), volunteering for a political campaign or cause (13% spring; 19% fall), or donating to a political campaign or cause (7% spring; 8% fall). Few (2% spring; 3% fall) reported any involvement in student government or policy groups, or campus or national leadership programs (5% spring; 1% fall). Just 2% of spring students and 5% of fall students took part in overtly political groups such as Campus Democrats or Republicans. Only 4% in spring and 5% in fall noted an involvement in campus cause-related or social activism groups.

Expressive Forms of Political Engagement

Among the most common ways that students reported being involved in the political process were by writing or signing a petition (66% spring; 59% fall), starting or joining a Facebook group for a cause (43% spring; 39% fall), persuading another person to vote (28% spring; 43% fall), displaying a political sticker, bumper sticker or sign (26% spring; 28% fall), attending a political rally or protest (21% spring; 23% fall), or contacting an elected representative at any level of government (19% spring; 18% fall).

Discussing politics via word of mouth (in person, over the telephone, or online), a hallmark of expressive political engagement, was rare among spring students (68% spent 15 minutes or less doing so over the three-day period surrounding Super Tuesday). Just 29% of spring students reported posting a political comment to social media, 24% texted about politics, and 18% chatted online about politics in the days before, during, and after Super Tuesday. By contrast, nearly all fall students (97%) reported discussing politics via word of mouth, with 27% spending more than two hours. The buzz on campus was summed up by a student who wrote:

I felt that the entire atmosphere on campus at this point was geared towards the election. Everywhere I'd go I would hear people discussing different propositions and whether or not they voted and so on.

The vast majority of fall students said they spent at least some time texting (76%), posting to social media (69%) and discussing politics online (62%). While no spring students mentioned gathering with people in their personal networks to watch election results, fall students commonly attended campus-sponsored watch parties or at informal gatherings of student groups:

I went to a friend's house to watch the presidential elections around 11 which was an experience to say the least. It was the first time I was embedded in a mixture of opinion, ideology, and political affiliation during an election.

Students commented that they enjoyed the social aspect of watch parties:

It was a fancy and professional event where professors discussed politics and the election, and we got to mingle while watching election results come in on large TV screens throughout the room. The night was very interesting because it turned the election into a social event, where we all primarily discussed the happenings from 8-midnight.

RQ3 asked: How do students use media to track and share political news? Results showed that students largely used digital media to track news, multi-screened, and were monitorial rather than participatory on social media.

Preferred Platforms for Political News

Students most often relied heavily on a computer (50% spring; 70% fall) for their political news, followed by cell phones (19% spring; 38% fall), and television (13% spring; 47% fall). News consumption through tablets, radio, and newspapers was very low among both groups. Media diaries revealed that many students reported switching between cable stations (rarely network broadcasts) and few reported any loyalty to a news outlet. Fall students generally multi-tasked on several screens: They tracked the results on television, while simultaneously monitoring social media and news sites on their laptops or smartphones. Reported one fall student:

I followed the results in real time on *NBC*. I also had *The Washington Post* online and *The Baltimore Sun* online open on my computer. While all this was going on, I carried on three text conversations about the election – one about marijuana legalization in Colorado, one about Obama winning Pennsylvania, and one about Friday Night Lights and its connection to this election season.

Social Media Use

Students commonly used social media to track but not share political news. Forty-three percent of spring students and 78% of fall students either “somewhat used” or “relied heavily on” Facebook for accessing political news. Forty percent of spring students and 61% of fall students either “somewhat used” or “relied heavily on” Twitter. Diary entries revealed that across both semesters few students used social media to express political views, or share/comment on political news. Of the 123 references by spring students of social media use, only five involved students tweeting, posting status updates, commenting on posts, or sharing a message with another user privately. The rest (95%) were examples of students taking a monitorial approach by using Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites to track a large quantity of news. The same was true in fall: Of the 417 references to social media use, 90% were of a monitorial nature. As a student in the fall semester said:

It is interesting to sit back and watch people debate online about these sensitive topics, many people are not afraid to state their opinions and arguments are happening all over my news feed because of this.

Potential Shifts in Political Engagement from 2012 to 2016

There is not, as yet, academic research on how American college students have engaged with politics during the 2016 presidential election season. However, polling on youth media use and political news consumption, together with journalistic reporting on media industry partnerships and an analysis of political candidate outreach strategies, help media literacy educators identify the forces that will help shape student political engagement.

Recent data confirm that young people continue to take a monitorial approach in their consumption of news. A 2015 study from the Media Insight Project (“How Millennials Get News” 2015) found that 60% of

millennials said they mostly “bump into news and information,” while 39% said they “actively seek out news and information.” Results from a 2015 Pew Research Center study (Mitchell, Gottfried and Matsa 2015) also showed that getting news on Facebook is “largely an incidental experience” – an important finding given that Facebook is the most popular social media site among teenagers (71% said they use the platform), ahead of Instagram (52%), Snapchat (41%) and Twitter (33%) (Lenhart 2015). Sixty-one percent of millennials with online access reported getting political news on Facebook in a given week, 17 points higher than CNN, the next most consumed source (Mitchell, Gottfried and Matsa 2015).^{vii} A survey of Snapchat users found that among millennials who reported receiving news about campaigns and elections from digital sources, social networks are the leading sources for information (65%), ahead of online news sites (57%) and search engines (53%) (Blizzard 2015).

Only 26% of millennials in the Pew study said politics and government was one of the three topics in which they are most interested, and only 35% said they talk about politics at least a few times a week (Mitchell, Gottfried and Matsa 2015). The Media Insight Project study found that just over 4 in 10 millennials said they regularly follow national politics (“How Millennials Get News” 2015). However, the same study found that the most common reason why Millennials follow news is civic motivation. Social factors such as talking about news with friends was also among the most common reasons (“How Millennials Get News” 2015).

One of the biggest media industry trends: partnerships between social networking sites and traditional media organizations. Facebook’s “Instant Articles” allows publishers to post interactive articles and videos directly to the News Feed. Snapchat, which hired a veteran CNN political reporter to oversee its editorial operation (Mahler, 2015), has positioned itself as a hub for political news. Its “Discover” feature invites mainstream media brands to publish directly to its platform. Snapchat used its user-generated curation feature “Live Stories” to provide on-the-ground coverage from many perspectives during campaign events in early battleground states (Luckerson 2015).

Snapchat has an obvious appeal to media outlets and politicians: 63% of its roughly 100 million active daily users are between the ages of 18 and 34 (Goldmacher 2015). Preliminary data show that millennials on Snapchat are politically engaged. Two-thirds said they are likely to vote in the 2016 election, and one-third of all likely voters use Snapchat. Nearly two-thirds of millennial Snapchat users said they are closely following the presidential election, and roughly two-thirds who stated interested in Snapchat’s Live Stories said they are interested in political events such as presidential debates (Blizzard 2015).

In an effort to capitalize on these audience trends, politicians are using platforms such as Snapchat and Periscope to post behind-the-scenes videos from the campaign trail (Goldmacher 2015). Many presidential candidates are also encouraging their supporters to build online communities and start peer-to-peer discussions. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders both have website features where supporters can sign up to host or attend a debate watch party. Several candidates have website landing pages dedicated to helping bloggers or community organizers who are supportive of their cause communicate with each other. Almost all candidates use their websites to encourage dutiful engagement – with opportunities to volunteer by canvassing door-to-door, making campaign phone calls, registering voters, and collecting signatures. Less common are opportunities for expressive engagement, one example of which is candidates such as Sanders, Marco Rubio, and Rand Paul including images and pre-written campaign messages on their websites that supporters can share through social media.

Discussion

This study measured college students’ engagement with politics during two pivotal points in a presidential election year. Results revealed dramatic differences in spring and fall students’ interest in the outcome of the Republican primaries and the presidential election. Data suggest that one of the predictors of youth political engagement is whether a political issue or candidate is perceived to be of personal interest and benefit. Students polled in the spring reported that they were “oblivious” to the primaries, in part because most

students were neither residents of a state that held its primary vote on Super Tuesday, nor self-identified as Republican. By contrast, fall students reported that they felt personally invested in the outcome of the presidential election – in part, many reported, because they worried about the economy and their own job prospects. These findings give media literacy educators an opening to discuss with students the importance of following not just the last-minute horse race aspect of elections but also the debate around public policy and party platforms that come earlier in the election cycle. Even if students have no voting interest during the primary season or do not deem events such as Super Tuesday as personally relevant, tracking early developments is part of being informed and engaged in electoral politics.

It is reasonable to expect that student engagement will be higher throughout 2016 (early indications support this prediction) given that both parties held contested primaries with controversial candidates and are holding summer political conventions that will attract substantial media attention. Yet the potential for students to primarily consume information that has direct relevance to them or that aligns with their political beliefs is considerable given that the social media and news aggregation platforms they rely so heavily upon typically use personalization algorithms that cater to their habits and preferences (Pariser 2011). Since the last presidential election, companies such as Facebook and Google have created more sophisticated forms of automated personalization and made it easier for users to manually customize their feeds (Sengupta 2013; Vijayan 2013). In what has become known as “the echo chamber effect” or the “the filter bubble,” media consumers encounter content that becomes increasingly narrow and less diverse (Pariser 2011). Audience segmentation and the importance of escaping the filter bubble to become a broadly informed citizen are topics with clear media literacy implications.

While all students reported consuming social media heavily, Twitter and Facebook were used almost entirely as first-alert systems to monitor content rather than as megaphones for students to share news or express political beliefs. This observation, repeated in recent research on youth news consumption (“How Millennials Get News 2015; Mitchell, Gottfried and Matsa 2015), would profit from further investigation. It was unclear from this study whether students did not post to social media about the election because they felt uninformed, or whether they are so used to abundant information that they have concluded that their political opinions have already been expressed, leading them to spend more time collating political information than making an original contribution. Media literacy education “enables students to express their own ideas through multiple forms of media” (“Core Principles” 2007). Results of this study show that media literacy curricula should place additional emphasis on the ways in which students can participate in the “feedback loop” during election season.

An allure of Snapchat, Instagram, and Periscope is the ease through which users can participate in this feedback loop by sharing photos and hosting live streams. While media organizations and politicians may envision throngs of young people creating user-generated content around political events, results from this study show that they may be more likely to spend time monitoring curated political news on Snapchat Discover or watching Periscope streams. Even that is no certainty given research showing limited interest among millennials in following or discussing national politics (Mitchell, Gottfried and Matsa, 2015; “How Millennials Get News” 2015), although one study found that Snapchat users are politically engaged (Blizzard 2015). One of the major questions in this election cycle that warrants additional research and discussion in media literacy classrooms is whether the participatory potential of new social sharing tools leads to greater levels of content creation among students.

This study suggests that another key predictor of civic engagement during a presidential election year is whether a political event or campaign has a social component and has interest for students’ peer groups. In their media diaries, fall students commonly reported excitement about discussing the election with friends, persuading others to vote, and attending campus watch parties. For a pivotal political moment such as the November election, students commonly reported simultaneously watching the election results on television with friends, tracking several news sites on their laptops, and following breaking results via their smart phones. These findings align with research showing that millennials are driven to follow news for social reasons (“How Millennials Get News 2015”) and Martens’ (2010) argument that media learning is a social process. By all

indications, students gravitate toward peer-group engagement. They engage less as individuals than as members of a group – a concept addressed in both Short, Williams, and Christie’s (1976) social presence theory and Wellman et al.’s (2001) participatory capital theory. Thus, a critical question when seeking to predict political engagement of college students is whether an event or issue enables them to tap into their social network.

This study found that students show little engagement with both political and community activities that fall into the “duty-oriented citizen” category. Students were more likely to take part in expressive, low-barrier political actions and more likely to eschew commitments that take greater personal investments of time and resources. These findings support candidates’ strategies of asking young supporters to share pre-written campaign messages or photos on social media. Findings also suggests that media literacy educators should not apply pre-social media norms of what constitutes political and community engagement to this generation because the immediacy and ubiquity of social and digital media is prompting today’s students to engage in politics and their communities differently than previously studied college cohorts.

According to this study, college students today are not engaging in the kind of classic grass-roots community and political action as generations past. Politics for students today is first about reaching out to engage with their own personal networks. This study suggests that community has become an anachronistic word in an era of social media. Students do not use the term. In its place the term “network” has emerged. That shift in language suggests not only the technological underpinnings of today’s communications but the geographical deracination of a sense of community. Students do not think about “building” a community as much as they are concerned with “maintaining” their network.

Limitations. Because this study used a nonprobability sample, there are limits to the generalizability of results. This study’s sample may have skewed more heavily toward Democrats than the student body at the university where this study took place^{viii} and college students nationwide. Additionally, students enrolled in a media literacy course may be more interested in the intersection between media and politics than a general student population. Because two different groups of students were included in the study rather than one group across two semesters, researchers could not control for variables that may have affected results. Another limitation, as previously noted, is that this study took place in an election year in which only the Republican Party held primary elections. This diminished the importance of Super Tuesday and may help explain low levels of political and political news engagement among spring semester students.

In conclusion, this study of political engagement of U.S. college students at two major moments on the political calendar found that students were most engaged with politics and political news when they felt a personal investment and when there was a social component to tracking election results. Students generally gravitated toward low-barrier political actions and expressive modes of citizenship. This study suggests that the ubiquity of social and digital media is changing the ways in which students are engaged in politics and their communities.

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ⁱ Because President Barack Obama was seeking reelection, the Democratic primaries were uncontested.

ⁱⁱ <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/ratings/electoral-map>

ⁱⁱⁱ In 2008, those who were considered “broadly engaged” in a range of civic activities such as attending community meetings, assuming leadership roles and volunteering, (19 percent) outnumbered those considered “civically alienated” (16 percent). In 2010, “civically alienated” (23 percent) outnumbered “broadly engaged” (21 percent) (“Millennials Talk Politics” 2007).

^{iv} Similarly, in the 2010 midterm election, those under 30 were the most likely to use social media for civic or political purposes (“Social Networking or Twitter” 2011).

^v Students completed this assignment for course credit but could opt out of having their responses used in the study.

^{vi} Means reported in this section are based on a Likert scale in which 1=very disinterested, 2=somewhat disinterested, 3=neither interested nor disinterested, 4=somewhat interested, 5=very interested

^{vii} Snapchat and Instagram were not options listed on this survey

^{viii} No official data on political affiliation of students could be found.