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The 2008 Presidential Campaign: Political Cynicism in the Age of Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube

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Considerable research over the years has been devoted to ascertaining the impact of media use on political cynicism. The impact of the Internet has been difficult to assess because it is not a single monolithic medium. For example, the 2008 presidential campaign was the first presidential campaign in which...
popular social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube were widely available to voters. Therefore, the campaign offered the first opportunity to explore the influence of these social media on political cynicism. In this study, we examined whether the use of such social media influenced political cynicism. We also considered the influence of user background characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy, locus of control, political orientation, demographics, and influence of family and friends), motives for using social media for political information, and users’ elaboration on political content. Several individual differences were stronger predictors of political cynicism than was social media use. In fact, social networking use was a negative predictor of political cynicism. Results supported uses and gratifications’ notions that the influence of social media on political cynicism is more attributable to user background and media-use differences than to sheer use of these popular sites.

The 2008 presidential campaign was the first to play out in the world of YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, and political blogging—the major Internet-based social media. These social media provide a new form of mediated communication that gives the audience access to on-demand content and the ability to share and discuss it with others (e.g., Levy, 2008; Papacharissi, 2009; Spigel, 2009). The most popular social networking sites (SNS) are relative newcomers: MySpace went online in 2003, Facebook in 2004, and YouTube in 2005. In the 2008 presidential campaign, social networks provided a new form of political communication for citizens to use to learn about candidates and issues (Dobbin, 2007; Makinen & Kuira, 2008).

Television stations and newspapers used these new media portals to engage viewers and readers (Armbruster, 2008; Atkin, 2008; Whitney, 2008). Traditional media companies embraced social media at a time when the companies themselves faced significant economic challenges (The State of the News Media 2007, 2008). Media companies were not alone. The campaigns themselves, particularly the Obama campaign, used social networking and interactive media to reach its voters (Carr & Stelter, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Learmonth, 2008). More importantly, these social media provided an opportunity for ordinary citizens to create their own political content, distribute it online, and comment on the content created by others. Each of these social media is distinct. For example, YouTube is primarily a video-sharing site that permits users to both view and upload video content and commentary. On the other hand, sites such as Facebook are more textual and are designed more for direct interpersonal and social connection. But an important similarity among these social media and a defining attribute of each is the fact that they are more user centered than their traditional media counterparts; therefore, they allow forms of political interaction that weren’t available in previous presidential campaigns.
The 2008 campaign also played out against a long-standing tradition of voter cynicism. Much has been written about the influence of older, more traditional media (e.g., newspapers, radio, television) on increased voter cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; J. W. Koch, 2003; Miller, 1974; Pinkleton, Um, & Austin, 2002). The Internet has become an additional source of political information with its own potential to influence voter attitudes.

However, the impact of social media on political cynicism has been difficult to assess because early studies tended to treat the Internet as a single entity. Few studies examined the use of individual categories of Web sites (e.g., news sites or opinion sites), and fewer still examined those specific sites that allow for social interaction (e.g., Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). The 2008 campaign was the first opportunity for researchers to study this phenomenon in a national presidential election. This inquiry is important, because social media introduced a new set of vectors along which information and opinion can travel—often directly from user to user. As a result, users are now in control of more of the distribution path. The ability for users to exercise greater control over their political media choices makes it appropriate to apply a user-centered media effects perspective to assess the effect of media use, in this case, the degree to which it predicts levels of voter cynicism.

Uses and gratifications has been the most widely used audience-centered perspective guiding media research in the last 35 years. Uses and gratifications is a media-effects perspective that emphasizes the role of the individual in the media use and effects process. As such, it focuses not just on media influence but also on how use and effects are influenced by users’ motives and background characteristics. Guided by this theoretical perspective, the goals of this study are twofold: to examine the relationship between three types of social media use and levels of political cynicism and to examine the relative contribution of users’ background characteristics, motives for using social media for political information, and the use of social media to explain political cynicism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Information

Political and communication scholars have long asserted that accurate information is necessary for informed and rational voting decisions (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Berelson, 1966). Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) identified three primary functions of political information: activation, reinforcement, and conversion—a pattern consistent in subsequent research
Television has been the predominant source of public affairs information since the mid-1960s (Bouza, 2004; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Landreville, 2007; Ostroff & Sandell, 1984). Beginning in the late 1990s, the Internet gained in popularity as a source for political news, particularly for college students (Lee, 2006). The advantages of the Internet for political information have been well documented (Kaid, 2002; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Robbin & Buente, 2008). Bimber (1998) argued that the Internet could facilitate greater political participation by giving voters the ability to learn about government, discuss issues and contact their representatives, and register to vote. Internet users who use the medium for information exchange show a higher percentage of interpersonal trust and civic engagement (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) reported that young respondents used the Web for political surveillance as a supplement to more traditional media content.

Of course, in addition to media, citizens receive political information from interpersonal sources as well (Campus, Pasquino, & Vaccari, 2008; Jackson-Beeck, 1979; Kingdon, 1970; N. S. Koch, 1994). The intersection between political information from the media and political information from interpersonal networks is an important point for this study. SNS on the Internet provide some of the same functions as interpersonal communication: user communities (Doddington & Adams, 2007), friendship maintenance (Gennaro & Dutton, 2007), social interaction (Ho & Niederdeppe, 2008), and the development of personal identities and relationships online (Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez, & Schuler, 2008).

Social Networks and Politics

Early research pertaining to the relationship between membership in social networks and political involvement suggested that the membership stimulates a collective interest in politics (Putnam, 2000), makes people available to elites for mobilization (Leighley, 1996), and helps people learn skills that make participation easier (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). More recently, scholars have found that social networks are a rapid way to disseminate innovative information and values (Gibson, 2001).

Online SNS are a relatively new phenomenon in politics. Potential voters can use online sources such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and even YouTube to interact with and obtain information from others. They can form various groups that support particular candidates or issues, seek out political information, engage in online discussions with others about issues or candidates, blog about political issues, and even share videos (Boyd, 2008; Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Lange, 2007; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2006; Xenos & Foot, 2007).
Brown et al. (2007) found that individuals who participate in online social environments such as SNS are likely to experience a sense of understanding, connection, involvement, and interaction with others who participate in these environments.

This representative research suggests that newer forms of social media may offer a unique avenue for political communication that may affect political cynicism much differently than political communication in presocial networking media eras.

Cynicism

Researchers have documented a loss of confidence in American institutions for nearly half a century, specifically the public’s dissatisfaction with the political process (Lipset & Schneider, 1983, 1987; Miller, 1974). Cynicism has been defined as a distrust of the political system (Dennis & Webster, 1975). Scholars draw the distinction between cynicism (considered to be unhealthy) and a healthy skepticism of government and suggest that the media cultivate the former (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

The media’s relationship to political cynicism has been well documented (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998). As one might expect, much of the research has focused on television (Kaid, 2002; Leshner & Mckean, 1997; Robinson, 1976), particularly on the effects of news and negative political advertising (de Vreese, 2005; de Vreese & Elenbaas, 2008; Forrest & Weseley, 2007; Jasperson & Hyun Jung, 2007; Kaid, 2002; Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, Hyun Jung, & LeGrange, 2007; Newton, 1999; Palser, 2007; Schenck-Hamlin & Procter, 2000). Much of this research indicates that consumption of media messages lead to cynicism, but the findings are not always consistent. For example, Pinkleton, Austin, and Fortman (1998) and Austin and Pinkleton (1999) found that active media use was a negative predictor of cynicism.

Researchers also have discovered that the media platforms make a difference. Kaid (2002) found that campaign ads on television and the Internet reported cynicism differently. Lee (2006) found that the perceived quality of political Web sites might predict cynicism. Hwang, Shah, and Cho (2008) found that media distrust was positively related to citizens’ online information seeking. Sweetser and Kaid (2008) found that levels of cynicism varied according to exposure to political statements on blogs.

The 2008 campaign provides the first presidential campaign to assess the impact of these new forms of social media on the political process—germane to this study, their role in enhancing or reducing political cynicism. These newer media clearly put more control in the hands of users, who can tailor their interaction with media content to meet their specific needs. This
attribute makes the application of a user-centered media perspective particularly amenable to studying such media use (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000).

Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications has been one of the most influential audience-centered perspectives applied to study media use and effects for more than 35 years. Uses and gratifications emphasizes the individual in the individual-media use-effects relationship. As such, the emphasis is on what people do with the media rather than on what the media do to them (Klapper, 1963). It assumes that people use media purposively, selectively and actively to satisfy their needs and wants.

Uses and gratifications suggests that media effects are the result of a confluence of factors working in concert. In addition to audience members’ social and psychological background characteristics, uses and gratifications focuses on the role of motives for selecting and using media, and the selection of specific media and their content. Researchers guided by this theoretical perspective try to account for these numerous factors to explain how and why people use various mediated and interpersonal channels to satisfy their needs and desires. In sum, a contemporary uses and gratifications model suggests that the route to media effects depends on one’s background characteristics, which influence motives for selecting and using media. Motives, in turn, influence how actively media are used. Together, these variables influence consequences of that use. Although uses and gratifications suggests that people use media purposively for need satisfaction, it recognizes that many effects, if not most, are unintended (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

Uses and gratifications has been applied to study the use of media for political information (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997), motives for doing so (Kaye & Johnson, 2002, 2004; McLeod & Becker, 1974), and political media-use effects (Eveland, 2004). Ancu and Cozma (2009) applied a uses and gratifications model to a study of SNS in the 2008 campaign and found that users were motivated primarily by the desire for social interaction.

The on-demand nature of social media and the different types of social media available (e.g., video sharing sites, SNS) provide users with the opportunity to make a wide range of mediated communication choices—from traditional and nontraditional media fare (e.g., news stories, campaign videos, and amateur video mash-ups) to interpersonal and social uses (e.g., Facebook pages, posting comments and opinions, forwarding interesting Web links).

According to the uses and gratifications model guiding this study, then, the route to effects begins with consideration of important background characteristics. In the context of political media use, the literature suggests that
several variables are potentially salient. These include self-efficacy, locus of control, political orientation, and the influence of one’s family and friends.

Background Characteristics

**Political self-efficacy.** Campbell, Gurin, and Miller (1954) defined political efficacy as “the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have an impact upon the political process” (p. 187). Tedesco (2006) suggested that political efficacy is significantly greater among young interactive Web users than young noninteractive ones. There is evidence that higher levels of political self-efficacy are related to lower levels of political cynicism (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002, 2004).

**Locus of control.** Locus of control is a personality trait that distinguishes between internally controlled individuals (i.e., individuals who believe they control events in their lives) and externally controlled individuals (i.e., individuals who believe that events in a person’s life are controlled by forces other than themselves; Rotter, 1966). In the context of media use, locus of control has been used to predict viewer motives and perceptions (Haridakis, 2002). The present study included locus of control because it is logical that people who felt they exerted greater control would be less cynical about their ability to influence the political system as it relates to them.

**Political orientation.** Research suggests that political orientation influences political media use and effects. Some research has suggested that political conservatives are change resistant, dogmatic, and satisfied with societal inequalities (Jost, Glaser, & Kruglanski, 2003). Other research has suggested that during the 2004 election, disenfranchised liberals turned to Weblogs to share information and to vent (Kaye & Johnson, 2006).

**Influence of family and friends on political behavior.** Researchers have recognized political socialization as a complex phenomenon involving numerous information-gathering strategies and communication channels resulting in myriad attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Along with media use, scholars have considered the importance of interpersonal communication in the formation and articulation of political opinions as well as other kinds of participation (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Moy & Gastil, 2006; Scheufele, 2002). In a study of young minority voters, interpersonal communication ranked most frequently as a source of political information, followed by Internet and TV news (Jasperson & Hyun Jung, 2007). In addition, young voters who watched national television news, read the newspaper, listened to political talk radio,
watched C-SPAN regularly, and engaged in interpersonal conversations about politics reported lower levels of cynicism.

**Motives.** The study of motivation for using media has been a central focus of uses and gratifications research. The needs and desires people seek to satisfy are viewed as being reflected in their motives for using media and other communication channels. Over the years, researchers have explored people’s possible motives for attending to political fare (McLeod & Becker, 1974) and for using specific media such as the Internet for political fare (Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Kaye & Johnson, 2002). These include seeking information, entertainment, relaxation, social utility, and guidance. In addition, when it comes to using the Internet or specific Internet functions such as YouTube, some users are motivated, in part, because of the convenience of online use (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

**Elaboration.** Motivation is linked to audience activity. It is important to recognize that some people are more interested in politics and therefore are more active and involved when seeking political information about the campaign. Perse (1990) suggested that one way people exhibit that involvement is with their level of elaboration (i.e., thinking about the content and what it means). Eveland (2004) discovered that anticipation of future dialogue (which may be the case with those who use SNS) motivates individuals to think about politics.

**Research Questions**

Researchers should consider the impact of each new medium on the political process. As noted earlier, much as been written about the effect of media content on voter cynicism, but the results aren’t conclusive. Some studies suggest that media use is a positive predictor of cynicism, whereas other studies (e.g., Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, 2002) question the impact of sheer media use or exposure on political cynicism. Given this lack of agreement on the influence of older media on political cynicism, it is prudent to examine the impact of newer social media on political cynicism with a series of research questions that may help clear up the ambiguity. The first research question looks at the three forms of social media examined in the study: SNS, such as Facebook; video sharing sites, such as YouTube; and the general category of political blogs.

RQ1a: How does use of social networking Web sites relate to users’ self-reported levels of political cynicism?
RQ1b: How does use of video sharing Web sites relate to users’ self-reported levels of political cynicism?
RQ1c: How does use of political blogging Web sites relate to users’ self-reported levels of political cynicism?

According to the tenets of uses and gratifications referenced earlier, media effects are due to much more than sheer exposure. Effects are the consequence of various factors working together. Uses and gratifications suggests that (a) individual background characteristics of media users (b) influence motives for using media for campaign-related content, which in turn (c) influence social media selection and amount of media consumed, (d) elaboration on the content, and ultimately the outcome of interest: (e) cynicism. The principal research question of the study asked about the relative contribution of each of these antecedent variables in predicting political cynicism.

RQ2: How do user background characteristics, motives, types and amount of social media use and elaboration on political content obtained predict political cynicism.

METHODS

Sample
Students in a large lecture course at a midwestern university were asked to complete survey forms for the study. The course is a liberal studies course that draws students from all majors across the university. In addition, the students recruited other participants based on a quota sample that reflected the statistical abstract of the age breakdown of voters in the state in which the research was conducted. All participants included in the study completed a 168-question printed questionnaire during the week before the 2008 general election.

A total of 467 questionnaires (242 from the class sample and 225 from the quota sample) provided usable data. The sample was 65.7% women (coded 1) and 34.3% men (coded 0). The age range was 18 to 93 ($M = 30.19$, $SD = 16.44$) years. In all, 21.6% were high school graduates, 59.5% had completed some college, 12.0% were college graduates, and 3.0% had graduate degrees.

Measurement

Locus of control. The study measured locus of control with Levenson’s (1974) 12-item index. Respondents rated their agreement, ranging 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with items that reflect three
Dimensions of locus of control: powerful others control (e.g., “My life is chiefly controlled by powerful others”), chance control (e.g., “When I get what I want it’s usually because I’m lucky”), and internal control (e.g., “My life is determined by my own actions”). Responses to the first two dimensions, reflecting external control, were reverse-coded. Therefore, higher scores evidenced greater internal control. This method of assessing level of locus of control has been valid and reliable in past research (e.g., Haridakis, 2002; Rubin, 1993). Responses were summed and averaged to create an internal control index (M = 3.48, SD = 0.44, α = .74).

**Self-efficacy.** The self-efficacy scale used to measure respondents’ perceptions of their level of political self-efficacy was adapted from prior research (e.g., Morrell, 2003; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Respondents rated their agreement, ranging 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with the seven items adapted from that previous research to measure perceptions of political self-efficacy, either internal (e.g., “I consider myself to be well-qualified to participate in politics”) or external (e.g., “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does”). Items reflecting low self-efficacy were reverse coded so that higher scores on the index represented greater political self-efficacy. Responses were summed and averaged to create the self-efficacy measure (M = 3.13, SD = 0.57, α = .67).

**Political orientation.** This study measured political orientation with Mehrabian’s (1996) Conservatism-Liberalism scale. This 7-item instrument was a well-suited measure in this study because it taps a person’s political leanings as opposed to political affiliation. Respondents rated their agreement, ranging 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with each item. Responses were summed and averaged to create an index of political orientation (M = 3.02, SD = 0.72, α = .82).

**Influence of family and friends.** Research has suggested that influence of significant others in one’s life impacts political attitudes and behaviors. Influence of family and friends was measured with five items that tapped both social and behavioral influences of respondents’ family and friends. Three items asked whether their parents, other family members, and friends are or were politically active. The remaining two items asked whether either or both parents encouraged the respondent to vote and whether one or both discussed politics with them when they were younger. This method of measuring the influence of family and friends was similar to, and adapted in part from, an approach that has been used in prior research to measure social influence and encouragement of parents and peers to participate in sports.
fanship (e.g., Gantz, Wilson, Lee, & Fingerhut, 2008). Responses to the five items, ranging 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), were summed and averaged to create the index of the influence of family and friends ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.82$, $\alpha = .76$).

**Motives for using social media for information about the presidential campaign.** We measured motivation for seeking information about the campaign with a 47-item scale adapted from previous research, which was based on past measures of interpersonal communication, various media-use motives, and additional items specifically directed at online media use (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In addition, we included another 12 motive items specifically related to using the Web for political information (Johnson & Kaye, 2003).

Respondents were asked to indicate how much each of the 59 motive statements was like their own reasons, ranging 1 (not at all) to 5 (exactly), for using social media for political information about the campaign. Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was used to analyze the motive statements. Six factors, accounting for 66.69% of the total variance, were identified. Responses to items that loaded on each factor were summed and averaged to create indices of the respective viewing motives. Results of the factor analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Factor 1, *Political Evaluation*, comprised 11 items related to using the media to evaluate issues, candidates, candidates’ stands on the issues, and to reach a voting decision. ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.86$, $\alpha = .93$). Factor 2, *Convenient Information Seeking*, comprised 8 items related to using these media because they are an easy and new way to get information; they can be used anytime; for as long as one wants; they are liked; and one can see what’s out there ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .84$, $\alpha = .90$). Factor 3, *Entertaining Arousal*, comprised 4 items related to using these media because it is exciting, thrilling, amusing, and peps one up ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .91$). Factor 4, *Gainful Companionship*, comprised 3 items that reflected connecting with others to alleviate loneliness or get them to do something ($M = 1.71$, $SD = 0.80$, $\alpha = .82$). Factor 5, *Self Expression*, comprised 3 items that reflected using the media to give one’s input, to express oneself freely, and for the enjoyment of answering others’ questions ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 0.98$, $\alpha = .81$). Factor 6, *Pass Time*, comprised 3 items that reflected using these media simply to occupy one’s time and when there is nothing better to do ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.13$, $\alpha = .86$).

**Elaboration.** The study used Perse and Rubin’s (1990) five-item elaboration scale to tap the respondents’ level of cognitive elaboration on political content about the campaign obtained from social media they used. This
### Table 1

Primary Factor Loadings of Motives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1</th>
<th>Factor 2</th>
<th>Factor 3</th>
<th>Factor 4</th>
<th>Factor 5</th>
<th>Factor 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To see what a candidate would do if elected</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see how candidates stand on issues</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help make up my mind about how to vote in an election</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help me decide about important issues</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To judge what political leaders are like</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>−.03</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To keep up with the main issues of the day</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>−.12</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To remind me of my candidate’s strong points</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find out about how issues affect people like myself</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To judge who is likely to win an election</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For unbiased viewpoints</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enjoy the excitement of an election race</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is easier to get information</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I can use it anytime</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it’s convenient</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>−.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I can search for information for as long or as short as I want</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To see what is out there</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To search for information</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I just like to use it</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it provides a new and interesting way to do research</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is exciting</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it is thrilling</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it peps me up</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it amuses me</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So I won’t have to be alone</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it makes me feel less lonely</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I want someone to do something for me</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.73</td>
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<td>To give my input</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To participate in discussions</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because I can express myself freely</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because I enjoy answering other people’s questions</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.15</td>
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(Continued)
### TABLE 1
Continued

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td>When I have nothing better to do</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>.18</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.78</td>
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<td>Because it passes the time away, particularly when I’m bored</td>
<td>-.04</td>
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<td>.26</td>
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<td>.77</td>
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<td>Because it gives me something to occupy my time</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.24</td>
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<td>Eigenvalue</td>
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<td>% variance explained</td>
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<td>9.98</td>
<td>8.38</td>
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<td>$M$</td>
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<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.46</td>
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<td>$SD$</td>
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### TABLE 2
Summary of Beta Coefficients When Regressing Political Cynicism on Audience Individual Differences, Motives, Social Media Use and Elaboration on Political Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Step 4</th>
<th>Step 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>.08</td>
<td>.10*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.08</td>
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<td>Political self-efficacy</td>
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<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locus of control</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Influence of family &amp; friends</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
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<td>Political Orientation</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.07</td>
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<td>Political evaluation</td>
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<td>.05</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Convenient info seeking</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>Entertaining arousal</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gainful companionship</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td>-.15**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self expression</td>
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<td>.06</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
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<td>Social network use</td>
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<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blogging use</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td></td>
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Note. $R = .19$, $R^2 = .04$, $F(3, 453) = 5.83$, $p < .01$ for Step 1; $R = .25$, $R^2 = .06$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(7, 449) = 4.35$, $p < .001$ for Step 2; $R = .31$, $R^2 = .09$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(13, 443) = 3.50$, $p < .001$ for Step 3; $R = .33$, $R^2 = .11$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $F(16, 440) = 3.25$, $p < .001$ for Step 4; $R = .36$, $R^2 = .13$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(17, 439) = 3.81$, $p < .001$ for Step 5.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
index relates media content to existing knowledge and images. The items pertain to thinking about the media content and its consequences. Participants reported how often they have thoughts referenced in the five statements, ranging 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Responses to the five items were summed and averaged to create an index of cognitive elaboration ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.82$, $\alpha = .90$).

**Amount of social media use.** The study asked respondents to indicate how often (1 = never, 5 = very often) they used each of three social media sources for acquiring political information about the presidential campaign. These were YouTube or other video-sharing sites such as Google Videos; SNS such as Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn; and political blogs. Of these sources for political information, on average participants used YouTube or other video-sharing sites most often ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.41$), followed by SNS ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.23$) and political blogs ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.08$).

**Cynicism.** The study used Pinkleton and Austin’s (2001) six-item political cynicism scale. Respondents rated their agreement, ranging 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with each item. Responses were summed and averaged to create an index of political cynicism ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.82$, $\alpha = .75$).

**RESULTS**

RQ1a, 1b, and 1c asked whether the amount of time using each of the three social media was related to political cynicism. Cynicism related significantly and negatively with social networking ($r = -.14$, $p < .01$) and blogging ($r = -.09$, $p < .05$). It was not significantly related to using YouTube ($r = -.03$, $p = .52$). Of course, the findings do not demonstrate a causal relationship, but they do suggest that the use of SNS and political blogs correlated to lower levels of self-reported voter cynicism.

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the contributions of background characteristics; motives for using social media for political information about the campaign; how often participants used YouTube, SNS, and blogs for political information about the campaign; and cognitive elaboration to explaining political cynicism. The overall regression analyses were used to answer RQ2. Guided by the uses and gratifications model previously described, variables were entered into the equations in the following conceptual order: (a) demographics, (b) social media user background characteristics, (c) user motives, (d) amount and type of media used, and (e) elaboration on political content.
Predicting Political Cynicism

Variables entered on the first step (age, gender, education) accounted for 3.7% of the variance ($R = .19$, $p < .01$). Age ($\beta = .10$, $p < .05$), gender ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .01$), and education ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .01$) were all predictors of political cynicism. Entering other background characteristics on the second step increased explained variance by an additional 2.6%. The $F$ change was significant ($p < .05$). Influence of family and friends ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$) was the only predictor. In addition, age and education ceased to be predictors at this step. Entering the motives on the third step added an additional 3% to the variance. The $F$ change was significant ($p < .05$). Gainful companionship motivation ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$) was a significant negative predictor of political cynicism. Age ($\beta = .10$, $p < .05$), and political self-efficacy ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$) emerged as predictors at this step and gender ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$), and influence of family and friends ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$), remained predictors. Use of YouTube, SNS, and blogging were entered on Step 4. The $F$ change was not significant ($p = .11$). But amount of time spent in social networking was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.13$, $p < .05$) of cynicism. Gender, political self-efficacy, influence of family and friends, gainful companionship motivation remained predictors; age ceased to be a predictor. Elaboration was entered on the fifth step. Explained variance increased by 2.3%, with a significant change in $F$ ($p < .01$). Elaboration was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$).

Accordingly, after all variables were entered, gender ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .01$), political self-efficacy ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$), influence of family and friends ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .01$), gainful companionship motivation ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .01$), social networking ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$), and elaboration ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$), were significant contributors to the final equation. The final equation accounted for 12.9% of the variance in cynicism, $R = .36$, $R^2 = .13$, $F(17, 439) = 3.81$, $p < .001$. The results of the regression analysis are listed in Table 2.

These results suggest, at least among this sample, that male individuals low in self-efficacy who elaborated on political information about the campaign, but tended not to use SNS for political information about the campaign and whose family and friends did not provide robust examples of political socialization influence from their family and friends, were more cynical than their counterparts.

**DISCUSSION**

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the use of new social network media during the 2008 presidential campaign and the impact of...
their use on political cynicism. Drawing on assumptions of uses and gratifications theory, we also considered the contribution of certain user background characteristics and motives for using social media during the campaign. The 2008 presidential election provided an important context for this exploratory study because it was the first presidential election in which these social media were readily available.

Each of the social media studied here provides users with the ability to access political information on demand, but in different ways. YouTube is a delivery system for video, SNS such as Facebook and MySpace are used primarily for interpersonal and intergroup communication, and certain political blogs provide a forum for commenting on and reading about political information in a more mass communication-related context.

The media’s role in contributing to or detracting from political cynicism has been a widely studied concern in political communication research over the years. Consequently, examining the possible role of newer media sources during the first presidential campaign in which they emerge on the political media landscape is an important contribution to the literature. It permits us to consider how using their use and effects may be similar to how audiences use older media while permitting us to consider what may be new in the way they are used by audiences and the effects of that use. For example, is YouTube simply a new video channel like TV, or does its social networking characteristics alter the effects of older generation video channels? Similarly, is Facebook simply another interpersonal or group communication channel or does its online characteristics alter the effects of other modes of interpersonal communication?

The results of this study lend support to researchers who claim that media use itself may not be a major contributor to political cynicism (e.g., Pinkleton et al., 1998). In an environment in which people have a number of media from which to choose, the most significant predictors of cynicism may reside in the individual. Among this particular group of participants, background characteristics and motives for seeking political information were important. Political self-efficacy, influence of family and friends, and the motivation to use media for gainful companionship all predicted lower levels of cynicism. In addition, and contrary to early media research in this area, the use of the medium of SNS predicted lower levels of cynicism. The only independent variable in this study to predict higher levels of cynicism was the measure of elaboration.

Implications

Political self-efficacy was a negative predictor of cynicism. This is consistent with a large body of research that has suggested that those who feel they are
more politically efficacious tend not to be highly cynical of politics and campaigns (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Of the background characteristics that predicted cynicism, the one that may be most fruitful to consider in future research is the influence of family and friends. The participants in this study who discussed politics and/or have been encouraged to vote by their family (items that composed this measure) tended to be less cynical. This suggests that such interpersonal and familial political socialization may lead people to be less cynical.

Prior research has suggested that the influence of one’s family and friends as political socialization agents is important and contributes to one’s political attitudes and behavior such as civic participation (Matthews & Howell, 2006; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2007). Similarly, researchers have found that those who engage in interpersonal conversations about politics reported lower levels of cynicism (Jasperson & Hyun Jung, 2007). If the influence is positive toward the political process, then it is reasonable to assume that one would be less cynical. Our measure of the influence of family and friends included indicators of such positive influence and interaction (e.g., being encouraged to vote by parents, discussing politics with parents, having politically active friends and family).

The importance of interpersonal communication (or at least a desire for it) may be reflected in our finding that gainful companionship—the only socially oriented motive—was a predictor. The Internet has long been regarded as a medium that is particularly amenable to interpersonal connection and social activities (e.g., Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Harasim, 1993). In particular, YouTube gives users a forum for such connection and sharing information with others (e.g., The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, 2006; Fernando, 2007). SNS are designed explicitly for this purpose.

Our findings linking an interpersonal motive and a lack of cynicism may support a long-standing view that interpersonal networks are used as resources for those who don’t trust the conventional media (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Thus, using media that help people connect with those they know may lead them to find sources they deem to be more trustworthy than the mainstream media.

However, we should be cautious not to conclude from just one study that those who are motivated to use media for interpersonal reasons may be less cynical because gainful companionship was the weakest of the motives in the study. The fact that gainful companionship was a weak motive for seeking political information is not surprising. Political evaluation and information seeking are logically more salient reasons for desiring political information. However, the fact that gainful companionship was weaker than other motives also may simply be an artifact of the fact that this was the first election in which social media were prevalent.
Nonetheless, consistent with other research, gainful companionship does suggest a social utilitarian reason for using media generally (Hanson & Haridakis, 2008) and for political information specifically (Kaye & Johnson, 2003).

Moreover, for participants in this study, the use of SNS predicted a lower level of cynicism. This finding offers preliminary justification for considering the role of these media forms in future elections as they gain greater prominence on the media landscape. It is interesting to speculate that media that permit interaction with other citizens offer new ways to participate with others in the political process. One feature is the ability to express oneself both by creating content and by responding to others. But there may be something else about SNS that makes them important predictors of political perceptions such as cynicism. That is highlighted by the fact that political blogs, which also permit reading and commenting with others, was not related to and failed to predict cynicism. It may be that SNS are inherently more social and that blogs may be perceived as more mass-communication oriented (i.e., more likely to be read like a traditional newspaper).

Our findings beg the question, What types of social networks do these social media entail, and what are their specific relationships to cynicism? A key tenet of some of the early investigations of offline social networks is that social interaction exposes people to a different set of politically relevant information and stimuli than they possess individually (Huckfeldt, 2001; Mutz, 2002).

By the same token, the finding that use of SNS negatively predicted political cynicism must be interpreted cautiously. Although the use of some SNS may be associated with lower cynicism among some users, the small negative correlations between cynicism and YouTube use and between cynicism and social network use suggest that they may not be major inhibitors of political cynicism. Thus, a wider array of factors that may work in concert with use of these media must be considered in future research.

Finally, the strongest predictor of cynicism was elaboration. Those who elaborated on the content (e.g., thought about it over and over) tended to be more cynical than those who did not elaborate on the content. It is interesting that elaboration, a lone activity, predicted greater cynicism. However, other predictors that were more social in nature (i.e., influence of family and friends, social motivation, and use of social networking) predicted lower cynicism. These results may suggest that one way to mitigate political cynicism is through social media use.

In addition to specific background characteristics and motives, we also considered some demographic variables in this study, specifically age, education, and gender. Of these, only gender was a predictor of political cynicism. When combined with other factors, the results suggest that men
who were low in self-efficacy and did not seek political information for companionship tended to be more cynical. Or, alternatively, perhaps the results suggest men who were high in self-efficacy and sought political information for gainful companionship and turned to social networking sites for that information were less cynical.

Limitations and Future Research

There were some obvious limitations to this study that should be addressed in future research. First, we applied a uses and gratifications framework in this exploratory study. Accordingly, we focused more on the role of individual differences, motives, and the selection of media for political information than on the actual content consumed. We did not assess the type or nature of the discussion that occurred on SNS. We also did not assess the actual content viewed on YouTube. Future research should consider such content-related questions.

Future research also should examine in much greater detail the contribution of personal background characteristics and motives when examining media effects. We examined specific background characteristics that prior literature suggested should be relevant to political cynicism and/or political media use. However, if as this study argues, social media give individual users enhanced opportunities to be more actively involved in content creation and distribution (one example being through the various social media sites), then the examination of the users in greater detail is not only appropriate but necessary to understand better the specific motives, levels of activity, and effects of their media use. For example, beyond elaboration, we didn’t consider other aspects of activity, such as users’ level of intentionality when seeking political fare. Many researchers have assumed that Internet use is more interactive than the use of older media. But, without empirical confirmation, we don’t know that such speculation is necessarily correct. For example, surfing YouTube videos for political fare may be no more interactive than channel surfing for such fare on television. If use of the two channels is similar, differences in effects may be difficult to interpret.

In addition, this study did not differentiate between those who create media content in the social networking environments and those who merely read or watch the content posted by others. The interpersonal nature of social media provides researchers with an opportunity to study concepts such as opinion leadership in political campaign communication at a level that could not have been imagined in early political studies. These newer media also give researchers an exciting opportunity to consider the flow of communication in the diffusion of ideas and the mobilization of political participation.

Another obvious limitation of this study was the fact that participants were drawn from a convenience sample. Future research should solicit
broader, more random samples for the purposes of generalizability. Future research also should consider the relative influence of social media use among users of traditional media vis-à-vis the influence of other media they consume. For some, the social media outlets are their primary source of news and information. For others, SNS may simply complement, and even be subservient to their use of other media such as television, newspapers, and other Internet sources.

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