Social Media vs. Traditional Internet for Community Involvement
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Background

This paper reports on findings from a case study investigating community involvement in the town of Blacksburg, Virginia.

Objectives

- To investigate whether social media may represent a break through in broadening community involvement, especially among young adults.
- To test whether social media for civic purposes is less strongly correlated to education than the use of traditional internet for civic purposes.

Methods

- Purposeful sampling
- Focus group interviews
- Sample size was 222.

Measures

External Variables
- Education
- Extroversion
- Age

Mediating Variables
- Discussion Networks
- Membership
- Staying Informed

Outcome Variables
- Traditional Internet for civic purposes
- Social Media for civic purposes

Data Analysis

- Used confirmatory structural equation (SEM) to run path models
- Used SPSS for regression, correlations etc.

Results

Demographics
- Average age was 47.
- Most participants had higher education
- Median income was above $50,000.
- 90% used internet, averaging 14 years.
- 80% used Social Media.
- Correlations showed that education is not associated with the use of social media for civic purposes.

Path Model with Traditional Internet for Civic Purposes

Path Model with Social Media for Civic Purposes

Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N (sample size)</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Location (Blacksburg)</td>
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<td>34.6</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>34.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
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<td>Age (recoded)</td>
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<td>Marital status (married)</td>
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<td>80.3</td>
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</table>

Results

- Education is not strongly correlated with the use of social media for civic purposes as it is with the use of traditional internet for civic purposes.
- Being outgoing and talkative, one of the defining characteristics of opinion leaders is not significant in explaining the use of social media for civic purposes.
- Our findings indicate the highly social nature of the civic involvement of people who use social media -18-39 year olds.
- Social media does lead to increased civic involvement especially for younger adults, who traditionally have not been involved in local issues as older adults.

Future Directions

- To conduct a second wave survey in Fall, 2013.
- To recruit non-college young adults for focus groups through our partners, Literacy Volunteers of the NRV and Dorsett Publications (Christiansburg and the County).
- To include questions in the survey to analyze the effects of internet vs. social media on online health seeking behaviors.
- To use our focus groups to help improve our Virtual Town Square website which is based on an automated, continuous aggregation of locally relevant online content generated elsewhere by others.

This research was supported by the National Science Foundation under a SoCS funded project called ‘Participation on the Virtual Town Square in the Era of Web 2.0’.