

Media, civic culture, and engagement

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ABSTRACT:

Different media technologies, especially new formats such as social networking sites and mobile phone, tend to affect how individuals' interact with their political world. While past research has used notions of social capital and civic culture to study these effects, this study applies Dahlgren's framework for civic culture. Moreover, we use quantitative methods to determine the utility of this framework and to provide a richer understanding of how media use influence the ways individuals engage with their civic and political world. In conclusion finds more similarities between Dahlgren's framework and social capital than differences. Nevertheless, some distinctions suggest new avenues of future research.

Media provide a lens through which individuals observe and make sense their political world. These initial observations, or lack thereof, have been linked to levels of individual civic and political engagement in Western Democracies (Putnam, 1995; Norris, 1996; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; and Dahlgren, 2005). Heavy use and specific uses of different media technologies, especially new formats such as social networking sites and mobile phone, may affect individual observations of the political world, and subsequently influence their interaction with their political world. For example, the Internet has contributed to the destabilization of the traditional political communication structure, mainly the traditional mainstream media, by potentially diminishing homogenous mass media messages (Dahlgren, 2004). In addition to the structural shifts in the media, new communication technologies provide unique platforms where online deliberation creates new interactional dimensions of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005). This fluid nature of information available online and the communication capabilities of mobile technology potentially affect the nature of public discourse, and subsequently affect functioning of democratic systems.

Scholars have examined the effects of new media technologies on democratic societies, but many focus on the effects on engagement and participation (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Xenos and Moy, 2007). Other studies have examined the effects of new media on social capital (i.e. interpersonal trust, group membership, and informal network ties) (Shah, Kwak, and Holbert, 2001; Uslaner, 2004). In this study, we explore new measures of civic culture by applying Dahlgren's analytical framework of civic cultures instead of social capital or civic/political engagement. Our impetus for this venture is to attempt a holistic snapshot of the effects of media on civic culture. While civic and political engagement may arguably be the most important indicators of a democratic society, they are nevertheless not the only ones. In addition,

other aspects of civic culture left unexamined may influence civic and political engagement, and thus provide better illustration of the working pieces of Western Democratic society. Therefore, we argue that by applying Dahlgren's framework to survey analysis, results may prove more insightful.

Civic Culture, Social Capital, and Civic Cultures

Some of the earliest work on the state of democratic societies is Almond and Verba's (1963) *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Within this work, the authors conclude that in order to maintain a functioning democracy, there must exist a balance among the various roles an individual has within the system. For examples, individuals should balance their role as citizens; where their duty is to engage their governing bodies through actions like voting; and their role as subjects, where individuals must also be obedient to their government such as following the laws. To do so, they developed a theoretical concept, "civic culture," to map key cultural variables found within functioning democracies (Almond and Verba, 1963). Their discussion of these roles is similar to Dahlgren's (2009) argument that healthy civic cultures not only expect individuals to participate in their system, but also share values, ideals and appropriate levels of trust. The drawback of Almond and Verba's framework was their level of analysis. Moreover, they used few variables to define an entire country's civic culture.

Another highly influential book in this area is Putnam's (1995) *Bowling Alone*, which popularized the term "social capital." Putnam defines social capital as the "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them... [that] can affect the productivity of individuals and groups." (p. 19). Hence, social interaction between individuals creates social-psychological benefits like social trust and

informal network ties. These benefits bind groups together through mutual reciprocity and trust and create the potential for groups to undertake collective action. Social capital, therefore, is an excellent variable to examine of democratic societies. Dahlgren's (2009) framework is quite similar to Putnam's social capital (1995, 2000). Yet, Dahlgren chose to test his framework with a qualitative approach, we examine this framework with quantitative methods (2009).

In an attempt to shed new light on the aforementioned concepts, Dahlgren (2009) provides six mutually reciprocal dimensions of civic culture. He defines, "civic cultures [as the] cultural patterns in which identities of citizenship, and the foundations for civic agency, are embedded" (Dahlgren, 2009, p.103). It is important to note civic identities in his definition, as he stresses that civic identities drive the other 5 dimensions of civic culture. In addition, the cultural patterns he describes are not static but instead dynamic in nature, constantly being shaped by an array of factors, ranging from family size to legal institutions and economic factors (Calavita, 2005; Dahlgren, 2009). While all these institutions are worthy of closer examination, Dahlgren focuses his work on both traditional and interactive media. Our own study follows this focuses on media as well.

Dimensions of civic culture

In order to test his claims, he provides an analytical framework to analyze the role of media and their influence on the necessary conditions that propagate healthy civic culture and civic engagement (Dahlgren, 2009). Dahlgren divides the necessary conditions for civic engagement into the following six dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and civic identities. It is important to note that Dahlgren argues that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive but for the sake of empirical analysis it's necessary to treat these as single

variables. Thus, our study provides this treatment to his theory and uses quantitative methods to analyze the relationship between these dimensions and media.

Naturally, the first dimension, political knowledge, is a proven factor that promotes functioning democratic systems. Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) popular work on political knowledge in the United States showed several indications that higher level of political knowledge with political participation. Dahlgren, however, adds to his discussion of knowledge and the means and skills to acquire political knowledge. More precisely, a civic culture will suffer if lacks either the means for the public to access political knowledge or the resources to educate the public to sufficiently acquire political knowledge. For example, free Internet access does not ensure a knowledgeable public if they lack basic computer literacy skills.

The next dimension is values. Simply put, a healthy civic culture must have substantial amount of shared values among the citizens. Shared values provided a framework for the public as to how to live and treat one another. He suggests that most citizens fail to notice they share these values because adhering to them prevents many conflicts. However, shared values among citizens doesn't mean a complete lack of conflict. To better explain this, Dahlgren distinguishes between procedural values and substantive values. Substantive values include equality, tolerance, and solidarity; while procedural values include openness, accountability and discussion (p. 111). Procedural values are most useful during conflicts as they provide a framework for a fair way to settle the conflict. While substantive values are embedded in almost all civic and political action.

The third dimension of a healthy civic culture is trust. Dahlgren adds a little more density to previous scholars discussion of trust in institutions and interpersonal trust (Putnam, 1995). Moreover, he asserts the necessity for democratic societies to configure an optimal trust and at

times the need for directed trust. Optimal trust is a figurative ratio between the levels of trust and mistrust towards others and institutions. This “ratio” should be determined based on circumstances within the given democratic society. This discussion of trust accounts for the notions that some skepticism is necessary to maintain balance (Warren, 1999). For example, when the U.S. government failed to recover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, it’s quite likely that the citizens’ optimal trust in institutions decreased. Also, individuals must at times direct their trust in order to mutually benefit from one another or their institutions. By directed trust, Dahlgren means at least enough trust to work with one another.

The next dimension is access to spaces of communication and spaces of action. Communication spaces can be various different forms of communication ranging from the ability for citizens to communicate with one another to contacting their representative officials. Essentially, this dimension examines the citizens’ access to the public sphere. In addition, citizens must also have the ability to enter the spaces where policies and decisions are made and discussed. Yet, the majority of discussion here focuses on the potential in new media to create new spaces.

Yet another important dimension of civic cultures is the presence of recurring civic and political practices. These practices can be individual, group, or collective. Nevertheless, the Dahlgren emphasizes the importance of the recurrence of these practices. He argues that repetition of these acts helps to give the practices meaning and prominence within the democratic society. Over time these practices become traditions further cementing their role in civil society. Despite the need for traditions, new practices must emerge in order to meet the new civic identities developed by the public. Dahlgren is careful to remain vague about this topic as it seems that he wants this dimension to include community and political engagement.

Finally, civic identities are the subjective views individuals have about their role as a member and participant of a democracy (Dahlgren, p.118). For Dahlgren, these identities are very important to the health of the civic culture. In fact, civic identities are arguably the catalyst for the other five dimensions. “For example, identities build on knowledge and values,” Dahlgren explains, “they can be reinforced by trust, and embodied in particular spaces via practices – pursuing issues by the use of civic skills – that in turn serve to reinforce identities” (p.119). Still, it’s important to note that citizenship is not only subjectively defined, but also defined by various institutions such as schools, religion, or media.

Concluding the discussion of Dahlgren’s framework, our study is more concerned with the effect different media format have on these theoretical dimensions of civic culture. More specifically, the effect, if any, that traditional, Internet, and mobile technologies have on operationalization of each of these dimensions.

Media and Civic cultures

For this study, we aim to test the relationship between different media and Dahlgren’s civic culture framework. The impetus for testing this is first dissatisfaction with some of the measures in the original Almond and Verba study (1963). Moreover, we also hope to examine these results with other research on social capital to determine whether this analytic frame is distinct and useful for understanding democratic societies. As a preliminary study to this larger question, we will examine the effects media technologies have on the six civic cultures dimensions.

Putnam’s (1995) *Bowling Alone* suggests that citizens are less active, politically and civically, and less trusting of their political institutions. In addition, he contended that the privatization of leisure time and the consumption electronic media, specifically television, are

major contributors to these declines. However, when he used individual level indicators for different kinds of uses with broadcast media, his conclusions are different (Putnam, 2000). Namely, certain uses of television lead to increases in civic and political behaviors (See also Norris, 1996; Shah, 1998). Therefore, we modestly expect for news uses of broadcast news to have a positive influence on the different dimensions of civic cultures.

Research on the Internet and political behavior suggests that certain motivations and uses of online technology can increase knowledge gain as well facilitates some participatory behaviors. An initial advantage of online technologies is that it lowers the cost of accessing information (Xenos and Moy, 2007; Bimber, 2001; Bimber, 2003). In addition, research also suggests that individuals may turn to the Internet to reduce information uncertainty, regardless of their level of political interest (Xenos and Moy, 2007). Still, individuals' psychological motivations are strong predictors of knowledge gained from the Internet. For example, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) find that informational uses of the Internet correlate with civic engagement. Conversely, entertainment uses lead to detrimental effects. Other research examines the role of Internet competency for increases in benefits gained from the Internet. Eveland, Marton, and Seo (2004) illustrate that individuals with high levels of Internet sophistication can increase certain measures of political knowledge. This study shows that while hyperlinked Internet news may lead to a decrease in factual knowledge, it increases the density of the individuals' knowledge structure. Importantly, density of knowledge structure may be influenced by cognitive elaboration of information (Eveland et al, 2004). These studies, at the very least indicate that the Internet may affect the dimensions of civic cultures in distinctive ways from other media; especially with regards to practices and knowledge.

Scholars have started to examine the effects of mobile phone on the public life (Campbell and Kwak, 2011; Wei, 2008). The mobile phone has been referred to as a hybrid medium in that it is both mass media and an interpersonal communication tool. Individuals can use their mobile device for entertainment, information seeking, or for interpersonal conversation (Campbell and Kwak, 2010; Campbell and Kwak, 2011). While little research exists, recent empirical work asserts that technological competency interacts with informational use to increase political participation. Since participation and knowledge are often correlated, one can infer that informational mobile phone use and technological competency may increase levels of political knowledge. This deduction, however, leads to new questions. Are their detrimental effects for entertainment uses of mobile phones? Kwak and Campbell (2010) show results suggesting that recreational uses lead to participation. Thus, do recreational mobile phone use lead to increases in political knowledge? This finding would suggest that both entertainment and informational uses of the mobile phones increase knowledge. This result would be distinct from previous research on political knowledge and its relationship with traditional media and the Internet.

Methods

Data

This study relies on national survey data collected between July 29 and August 20, 2010 in 10 cities in Colombia, by the Universities of Wisconsin and Externado de Colombia, as part of their biennial study of communication and political attitudes in Colombia. The sample was designed to represent Colombia's adult urban population—76% of Colombia's 44.5 million inhabitants live in urban areas. Survey respondents were selected using a multi-step stratified random sample procedure that selected households randomly, based on city size and census data. Once the number of households was allocated for a given city, a number of city blocks were

selected randomly according to housing district and strata. Then, individual households were randomly selected within each block. Finally, the study used the “adult in the household who most recently celebrated a birthday” technique to identify an individual respondent at random. Up to three visits to each household were made (if needed) to increase participation in the survey. A local professional polling firm, Deployectos Limitada, collected the data and 1,064 face-to-face completed responses were obtained for a response rate of 85%.

Measures

Control variables included age, income, gender, education, and family environment. An open-ended question probed respondents age ($M = 41.61$, $SD = 16.25$). The survey measured income by using the Colombian system of national household energy levels, ranging from one to six ($M = 1.88$; $SD = 1.07$). Respondents also indicated whether they were male or female (1 = Male, 0 = Female; $M = .48$, $SD = .50$). A seven-point interval-like scale (e.g., 0 = None; 7 = Post-graduate) measured Education ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 1.48$). Family environment measured the extent to which respondents felt their parents fostered an open communication environment (0 = total disagreement; 5 = total agreement), and included the following items: “my parents often asked me my opinion when the family talked about a topic,” and “my parents encouraged me to express my feelings” ($M = 4.72$; $SD = 3.54$; $R = .60$).

Information technology use included internet use, social network site use, basic cell use, and advanced cell use. *Internet use* is a single item measure asking respondents how often (0 = Never; 5 = Frequently) they use email to keep in touch with family and friends ($M = 3.85$; $SD = 1.61$). *Social network site use* employs the same scale and is an additive index measuring respondents’ use of the sites to: “send videos and photos to your contacts” and “stay in touch with family and friends” ($M = 7.10$; $SD = 2.63$; $R = .29$). *Basic cell phone use* is an additive

index measuring how often (0 = Never; 5 = Frequently) respondents use cell phones to keep in touch with 1) family and friends and 2) people related to work ($M = 6.74$; $SD = 2.60$; $R = .16$). *Advanced cell phone use* employs the same scale and is an additive index measuring how often respondents use their cell phone to: receive news information, search for entertainment, browse the web, and send email ($M = 1.93$; $SD = 3.82$; $\alpha = .80$).

Mass Media use variables included print news, non-local television hard news, and entertainment television and comprised the following scale: 0 = Never; 5 = Frequently. *Radio news* ($M = 2.31$; $SD = 1.97$) and *regional television hard news* ($M = 2.63$; $SD = 1.92$) are included as single item variables in the analysis. *Print news* includes national paper, local paper, and national magazine ($M = 4.99$; $SD = 3.83$; $\alpha = .58$), *non-local television hard news* includes national TV news, current affairs TV, and international cable TV news ($M = 7.91$; $SD = 3.93$; $\alpha = .57$), and *entertainment television* includes TV soap operas and contest TV shows ($M = 5.33$; $SD = 3.35$; $\alpha = .57$). We acknowledge the somewhat low cronbach's alpha values, but we suggest these distinctions make sense conceptually. Table 1 presents the correlations among independent variables.

The present study employs a handful of dependent variables as indicators of civic culture to present an exploratory look at how interactions with various technology and media relate to them. Specifically, we include political knowledge, political values, trust, offline and online communication spaces, practices, and identities as civic culture indicators. To be sure, the operationalizations of some dependent variables are limited by the survey data at hand. In addition, we are especially sensitive in our attempt to distinguish between uses of informational technology use and online "spaces" in which engagement with others takes place. As Dahlgren notes, these concepts are fluid; therefore, defining them as "dependent" and "independent" is

tricky, but we wish to move the notion of “civic culture” forward by testing empirical relationships. Nevertheless, the distinctions warrant additional empirical exploration. Table two presents the correlations among dependent variables.

Political Knowledge is an additive index of 14 questions asking respondents about recent news and current events (e.g., Copenhagen Summit, newsworthy political figures, terrorist groups, celebrities, and unemployment statistics) and comprises the following scale (1 = correct answer; 0 = incorrect or don't know) ($M = 5.05$; $SD = 2.97$; $\alpha = .79$).

Political Values is an additive index of items tapping the extent of respondents “open-mindedness” about those who disagree with them on two issues (e.g., Colombian Guerillas and Homosexuals). Specifically, respondents were asked the extent of agreement (0 = total disagreement; 5 = total agreement) regarding whether they would allow those who disagree with their views to 1) not allowed to be presidential candidate and 2) not allowed to be teachers at colleges and universities. A higher score for this variable indicates a more open-minded position ($M = 11.57$; $SD = 6.07$; $\alpha = .74$). *Government Corruption* is an additive index measuring respondents' sense of corruption among different government branches (e.g., congress, police, justices, and national government comprising the following scale (0 = no corruption; 5 = a lot of corruption) ($M = 14.74$; $SD = 3.66$; $\alpha = .83$).

Interpersonal Trust is a single item measuring the extent of agreement (0 = total disagreement; 5 = total agreement) to the following statement: most people are honest ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.55$). *Institutional Trust* is an additive index measuring respondents' confidence (0 = No confidence; 5 = Great confidence) in a number of institutions (e.g., congress, judges, police, political parties, national government, city government, the Supreme Court, media, and guilds) and comprises the following scale ($M = 18.49$; $SD = 9.28$; $\alpha = .89$).

Online Space is an additive index measuring respondents' frequency (0 = Never; 5 = Frequently) of using the Internet to do the following: use email to discuss politics or current affairs, discuss the news or opinion columns that appear on online media, participate in online discussion forums, contribute to YouTube and Google, use online social networks to express views on current issues, use online social networks to mobilize contacts about social or political issues, and use a cell phone to mobilize contacts about social or political issues ($M = 9.87$; $SD = 8.26$; $\alpha = .77$). *Offline Space* is an additive index measuring how often (0 = Never; 5 = Often) respondents commented on news and politics with family, neighbors, coworkers or those who they study with, and friends ($M = 7.24$; $SD = 5.31$; $\alpha = .76$).

Political Participation is an additive index of 15 items probing respondents engagement (1 = Yes; 0 = No) in a wide variety of activities (e.g., attend a rally, attend a public meeting, participate in local municipal council, sign a petition, work for a movement/party, write letter to newspaper/magazine editor, express opinion on radio/TV, attend meeting related to education institutions, donate to political party/movement, donate to church/charity, donate to social/environmental group, attend protest, volunteer, work community project, and block a street protest) ($M = 1.88$; $SD = 2.53$; $\alpha = .81$).

Lastly, *Identity* is an additive index of four items probing respondents' agreement (0 = strongly disagree; 1 = disagree; 2 = agree; 3 = strongly agree) regarding their feelings about political matters (e.g., informed about political matters, understand politics well, importance of voting even if your candidate has no chance of winning, and general duty to vote in national elections) ($M = 7.03$; $SD = 2.67$; $\alpha = .67$). Table two presents the correlations among dependent variables.

Results

We employ multiple regression analyses to examine media and technology's role in various civic culture indicators. We control for a host of demographic variables and include a number of technology and mass media behaviors. Notably, two of the nine models are not significant, suggesting other factors are important for the variance among these dependent variables. Specifically, the model for interpersonal trust and values related to government do not meet the threshold for model significance. Table three presents the regression results.

The political knowledge model explains a little over 34% of the variance ($R^2 = .343$; $p < .001$). Several demographic variables are related, including gender ($\beta = .175$; $p < .001$), education ($\beta = .339$; $p < .001$), and income ($\beta = .170$), suggesting males with higher education and income answered knowledge questions more correctly. In addition, viewing non-local television news is related positively ($\beta = .125$; $p < .05$). The model for individual values explains little variance, but is significant ($R^2 = .048$; $p < .05$). Perhaps as expected, the more an individual is "open-minded" about issues, the more education he/she has ($\beta = -.147$; $p < .05$). However, somewhat surprisingly, living in a household with an open communication relationship with parents is related negatively ($\beta = -.131$; $p < .05$). As noted, the model explaining values related to government agencies is not significant.

As mentioned, modeling the independent variables on interpersonal trust results in a non-significant model, suggesting other factors are important for feelings regarding people's honesty. However, the institutional trust model is significant, although it explains variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .035$; $p < .05$). Notably, the results suggest that feeling more trustworthy about institutions is related to not having an open communication relationship with parents at a young age ($\beta = -.136$; $p < .05$). In addition, frequency of attention to non-local television news also matters ($\beta = .216$; $p < .001$).

The online spaces model explains a healthy proportion of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .416; p < .001$). The less income one has as well as an open communication relationship with parents is related ($\beta = -.221; p < .001$ and $\beta = .094; p < .05$, respectively). Social network site use ($\beta = .196; p < .001$) and using the cell phone interactively ways ($\beta = .396; p < .001$) is related. In addition, non-local television news ($\beta = .265; p < .001$) and radio news ($\beta = .189; p < .001$) is related positively, but entertainment news ($\beta = -.194; p < .001$). The offline spaces model is also significant and explains approximately 27% of the variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .271; p < .001$). Being male and having an open communication relationship with parents as a child matters ($\beta = .103; p < .05$ and $\beta = .180; p < .001$, respectively). Also, using a cell phone in basic ways ($\beta = .246; p < .001$) and non-local television news ($\beta = .170; p < .01$) is related.

For political participation, the model is significant but explains relatively little variance ($R^2 = .057; p < .001$). Advanced cell phone use and non-local television news is related weakly, ($\beta = .042; p < .001$ and $\beta = .039; p < .05$, respectively), and attention to radio news matters ($\beta = .111; p < .001$). Lastly, the model for political identity explains a little over 18% of the dependent variable variance ($R^2 = .184; p < .001$). In this model, education ($\beta = .155; p < .05$) and non-local television news ($\beta = .241; p < .001$).

Discussion

This study examines the utility of Dahlgren's analytical framework for civic culture. By examining the effects that traditional, Internet, and mobile technologies we were able to provide modest distinction between his framework and social capital. However, most our findings support an already existing body of literature about media and civic or political engagement, as well affects on knowledge, trust, and political talk (CITE). For example, one predicatable result

suggest that informational media uses leads to an overall increase in several key dimensions of civic culture, while entertainment uses lead to decreases (Norris, 1996; Shah, 1998). However, our findings do support fledgling research on mobile phones by suggesting that different features available on phones lead to distinct political communication behaviors. Moreover, advanced cell phone users showed increases in both political participation and the use of online communication spaces; while mobile phones without these features showed increases in offline political discussion, but not online (See Kwak and Campbell, 2011). This supports study that find that different uses of mobile phones may increase social capital and foster participation.

Taking each of Dahlgren's dimensions in account, our study shows that media affect levels of knowledge, communication spaces, political practices, and civic identity. One medium worthy of note is television. Our results suggests that informational uses of television may lead to higher levels of political knowledge, trust in institutions, increase uses of both online and offline communication spaces, political practices, and more cohesive civic identities. Even more surprising is the fact that print news had no effect any dimension of civic culture, which in past research tends to not be the case (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy, 1999).

Despite these interesting findings, our overall exploratory analysis of Dahlgren's civic culture dimension is underwhelming. Outside of the civic identities finding, all the other findings have been demonstrated before. As stated, most of this data provides support for existing literature. Still, one finding in particular suggests a possible trend. The dimension of civic culture most affected by media was the online communication spaces. Dahlgren explains that access to spaces of communication and spaces of action are good for a healthy civic culture. These spaces can exist in various different forms of communication ranging from the ability for

citizens to communicate with one another to contacting their representative officials. Essentially, this dimension examines the citizens' access to the public sphere. Our findings suggest that use of social networking sites, informational television, advanced mobile phone, and radio news strongly predict use of online political or civic communication. Conversely, only traditional cell phone use and informational television use predict offline communication. However, this too has a possible explanation in past research on generational uses of technology (Shah, Kwak, and Holbert, 2001).

One dimension that has received little attention is civic identity. Our results suggest a relationship between civic identities and television. In addition, Dahlgren's (2009) qualitative analysis of television, he argues that news television civic engagement may encourage civic engagement by learning about techniques people use through the news. In addition, he argues that non-news, yet popular television shows provide citizens with the opportunity to think through political values in our society. However, we cannot support the later hypothesis, only the former. Still, if this study provides one new useful concept for studies of civic culture is the development of civic identities through mass media. Further researcher should target this concept to better understand it's development in democratic societies.

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