

Introduction

There is growing research into whether the internet, and in particular social networking sites, make people more or less likely to encounter views that differ from their own. Underscoring this research is the belief that lack of exposure to different viewpoints pushes people toward extreme views and that this is detrimental to democracy (see, for example, Sunstein, 2007). In her article *Encountering “Difference” in the Contemporary Public Sphere: The Contribution of the Internet to the Heterogeneity of Political Discussion Networks*, Jennifer Brundidge identifies two major theories underlying the debate over whether the internet increases exposure to political difference. The first is the “selective exposure thesis,” which sees the internet as reducing exposure to political difference because it increases people’s control over who they communicate with. The second is the “weakened social ties thesis,” which sees the internet as increasing exposure to different views by reducing the physical obstacles to and the costs associated with connection outside of people’s immediate communities. Brundidge proposes instead the “inadvertency thesis” which acknowledges that people may not proactively take advantage of the heterogeneity offered by the internet but that inadvertent interactions are likely to take place online due to weakened social boundaries (682-687).

Through a series of unstructured interviews I explore what social engagement means to socially engaged millennials and how that informs their decisions to engage others across political difference. This research moves beyond the work on how people come to interact with people who have different views to explore how they respond once they do encounter these political and ideological differences. I look at the individual beliefs that drive the decision to engage or avoid. While this research focuses on interpersonal offline interactions, it brings a deeper understanding of the emotional and ideological motivations to engage across difference with potential application to online spaces as well.

Methodology

My initial research question was: how do socially engaged millennials think about social engagement. This question is well suited to unstructured interviews because it is focused on understanding the meanings that individuals in a specific subset of the population ascribe to a particular issue. It is crucial to frame this question appropriately and to clarify that I am not attempting to report what proportion of millennials are socially engaged—which would be the subject of a quantitative study—nor am I attempting to report on the range of what all millennials think about social engagement—which would necessitate a broader sampling frame. Based on my research question my sample was already narrowed to young adults between the ages of 18 and 33¹ who identify as socially engaged.

¹ Based on the Pew Research Center’s definition which considers young adults (over 18) who were born after 1980 to be millennials.

I recruited participants through several channels to include a range of ages and personal and professional backgrounds within socially engaged millennials. Two of my interviewees, both Berkeley undergraduates, volunteered to be interviewed in response to a request circulated by the Berkeley Public Service Center to its Student Advisory Committee.² I conducted a dyad interview with two women working in education whom I know personally. I accessed my three other interviewees through three different personal connections and in these cases, as well as with the Berkeley students, I had not met the interviewee prior to the interview. After conducting my first four interviews I identified the need to branch out to include other forms of social engagement such as direct service and social entrepreneurship in an attempt to gather data on diverse forms of social engagement. In my selection process I was relying on my own definition of social engagement to target potential participants or on my personal connections' definition to identify their friends as potential participants. For a more diverse sample I would try to reach out to individuals through other entry points that are not explicitly related to social engagement, for example through a company-wide email via a connection, through social media, or through other means that would allow the respondents to self-select as participants. While in some research allowing participants to self-select into the study would hinder the researcher's ability to sample for diversity, in this case my research is focused on what people who identify as socially engaged think about social engagement so this sampling method would be appropriate.

The goal of sampling in qualitative research, which Martin W. Bauer and Bas Aarts articulate in their chapter "Corpus Construction: a Principle for Qualitative Data Collection," is "typifying the varieties of representations," (32). In service of this goal Bauer and Aarts borrow corpus construction procedures from linguistics; doing preliminary selection, analyzing, and then iterating on this process until the sample is saturated (31). Saturation is the point at which new participants cease to provide novel information, though researchers must be careful not to mistake insufficient variety in the sample for saturation. After conducting my first few interviews and noticing that there were many similarities in both broadly how the respondents defined social engagement as well as in the actions and behavior that they talked about as a result of their engagement, I attempted to diversify my corpus by talking to people who seemed to be involved in different social engagement milieus, specifically social entrepreneurship and healthcare. The findings of this research would be further strengthened by conducting additional interviews with an eye towards diversifying the career paths and political orientations of the participants.

² The UC Berkeley Public Service Center partners with the community, student leaders and faculty to engage over 5,000 students each year as volunteers, and through jobs, internships, and courses. The Center's Student Advisory Committee provides formal student input on the Center's vision, programs, center-wide goals, strategic plans, etc. (<http://publicservice.berkeley.edu/content/advisory-committees>)

I conducted unstructured interviews between thirty and sixty minutes in length. I began each interview by asking the respondents what social engagement means to them. This allowed the respondent to determine the definition of social engagement for the particular conversation rather than having a uniform definition set by me at the outset and used across interviews. This enabled each interview to attain its own local internally produced meanings. Lucy Suchman and Brigitte Jordan discuss this in their contrast between survey interviews and everyday conversation but it is relevant as well for unstructured interviews which take on and amplify many of the practices used in ordinary conversation (240). In their discussion of conversation, positioned in contrast to survey interviews, Suchman and Jordan point out that “ordinary talk . . . is replete with alternate interpretations of meaning that, to the extent that they affect the adequacy of the communication in consequential ways, must be identified and remedied by the participants,” (238). In many ways unstructured interviews follow this same convention for clarifying meaning but have a lower threshold at which alternate interpretations are considered to have a consequential effect. Suchman and Jordan go on to say that “the occurrence of these alternate interpretations is not a product of sloppiness in the use of language, but is inherent to the language in ways that only situated interaction can resolve. Successful communication is not so much a product of the avoidance of misunderstandings as of their successful detection and repair,” (238).

The strength of unstructured interviews arises from their ability to make explicit the meanings that are left implicit in daily conversation as well as in other research methods such as surveys, structured interviews, and observation. In an unstructured interview the degree of explicitness is reliant on the interviewer’s ability to push past some of the interpretation or vagueness in the interviewee’s responses, or as Suchman and Jordan say, to detect and repair misunderstandings. The interviewer does this in service of gaining access to the interviewee’s experience at a more direct level than what is shared in normal conversations. In his book *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, Robert S. Weiss talks about the crucial role of the interviewer in setting this threshold saying that “the interviewer was also responsible for judging when the respondent’s report was adequate and when it needed elaboration, and, should elaboration have seemed desirable, for helping the respondent expand her responses without constraining the information she might provide,” (8).

Unstructured interviewing, and particularly the use of probes, speaks to Howard S. Becker’s point that “the nearer we get to the conditions in which [participants] actually do attribute meanings to objects and events, the more accurate our descriptions of those meanings are likely to be,” (58). Interviewers do this not only by talking to the participants directly, which is the clear first step, but also by pursuing this nearness within the interview by cutting through the interpretations the respondents are accustomed to using in conversation to uncover the raw, or at least less interpreted, material underneath. This close-up material allows the researcher to make what Clifford Geertz refers to in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* as “broader interpretations and more abstract analyses from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters,” (21).

Because this research is based on unstructured interviews and does not utilize other research methods such as participant-observation the findings are limited to talking about how people think about social engagement and how they talk about what they do rather than reporting on what they actually do in specific situations. Becker cautions against overestimating the interview's claims to assess aspects of the phenomenon under study saying "we should not jump from the expression of a private thought to the conclusion that that thought determines the person's actions in the situation to which it might be relevant," (62).

In their book *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*, Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell propose criteria for assessing qualitative research that are broadly categorized as indicators of confidence, of relevance, or of both. One of the confidence indicators is triangulation and reflexivity. Reflexivity "takes its starting point from the awareness of divergent perspectives," and necessitates the triangulation of diverse perspectives and methods to reckon with these divergences (345). This research relied on one method, unstructured interviewing, which limits the potential for unearthing inconsistencies. However the results section does raise some of the inconsistencies that arose across interviewees and discusses how I considered them from different viewpoints in order to develop a holistic interpretation. Steiner Kvale also explores this negotiation of inconsistencies in his book *InterViews: an Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* when he discusses communicative validity which "involves testing the validity of knowledge claims in dialogue," (244). Moving beyond the inconsistencies that arise due to insufficient variety of methods or inappropriate use of a particular method for the object of study, we can see the importance of inconsistency due to the "extraordinary power [of qualitative research] to picture and to question the complexity of the social reality investigated," (Kvale, 244). Clifford Geertz speaks to this need for qualitative researchers to contend with uncertainty, acknowledging that "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is," (29). So the more the researcher grapples with inconsistencies and the more the researcher dwells in them, the greater confidence others can have in the research findings.

Works Cited

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