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A Cross-Section of Political Involvement, Partisanship and Online Media in Middle America During the 2008 Presidential Campaign

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This study examined the relationship between the political involvement and online media use from a Midwestern statewide sample during the 2008 presidential election. A series of analyses of variance indicated that the increased use of weblogs, social networking sites, online video sites, and candidates' websites for news and campaign information purposes was moderately but positively related to political involvement. When controlling for social and political demographics as well as other media use characteristics, only two online media variables achieved statistical significance: general Internet use and frequency of weblog use. Using the Internet for campaign news was related to an increase in political involvement but regularly using blogs actually predicted *lower* levels of political involvement. These results were further moderated by partisanship, which suggests that the political influence of online media was positive only for certain segments of the population during this presidential campaign.

History might well identify Barack Obama as the first U.S. president elected because of online media (Talbot, 2008). Just as the presidential debate between Nixon and Kennedy marked the arrival of television as a politically transformative medium, the 2008 election—with debates sponsored and broadcast by YouTube—seemed to similarly demonstrate that the Internet had reached a comparable measure of widespread influence on the American political scene. Indeed, conventional wisdom positioned Obama's savvy online media campaign as essential to his success (Haynes & Pitts, 2009), and it is virtually certain that this trend of integrating newer forms of media with politics will continue to develop further in future campaigns.

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Compared with previous elections, the 2008 presidential campaign was the first to have witnessed unprecedented use of so-called Web 2.0 technologies (Pew Research Center, 2009). By now, the "Web 2.0" concept and moniker have become commonplace but still generally refer to more interactive, user-controlled means of generating, sharing, and contributing to content now available online and through mobile devices, specifically through the use of social media applications and networks (O'Reilly, 2005). Considering that these online applications can bring citizens, media, and politics closer than ever before, it is vital to examine their effects on political involvement.

This study investigates political involvement during the 2008 presidential campaign as it related to the use of online media for campaign news and information. Through a series of empirical analyses, we examine the extent to which these newer online media formats influenced a composite measure of what one statewide sample of citizens knew, how interested they were, and their vote likelihood in the 2008 election while taking into account other traditional media use factors and personal characteristics.

ONLINE MEDIA: AUDIENCES AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

It has been well documented that more and more U.S. citizens increasingly turn to the Internet not only to find political news but also to share political information, express their political views, and connect to similar-minded individuals (Kittilson & Dalton, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2009). As a result of the increasing popularization of Web 2.0 technologies, the most compelling—and now recurrent—theoretical prognostication is that, as Papacharissi (2002) pointed out, "The Internet and its surrounding technologies hold the promise of reviving the public sphere" (p. 9). The concept that Web 2.0—including weblogs, Facebook, and YouTube— might succeed in actualizing citizen politics has invigorated proponents of e-democracy (Chadwick, 2009) and stands in contrast to research on other forms of media that have seemingly failed in this regard (Putnam, 2000).

Indeed, previous research has found that mainstream traditional media often fail to provide citizens with a substantive basis for participating in public deliberation, even in instances of debate (Mermin, 1999). Downing (2003), however, suggested that citizen-based media often use the Internet for bridging as well as bonding functions to create a dialogue within and among members of social movements in addition to mobilizing and organizational information (see also Ayres, 1999). Ancu and Cozma (2009) went on to outline that such social factors, including connecting with like-minded others and candidates, were the primary motivations for citizens to visit candidates Myspace pages, with information-seeking activities ranking second. Altogether, there seems to be an understanding that the technological potential of the Internet—now manifest in Web 2.0 applications—is capable of not only flattening the publishing hierarchy but also enhancing citizens' political efficacy to the extent that increasingly pluralistic information flows might more closely resemble idealized Habermasian salons and cafés than contemporary profit-driven forms of what can be considered traditional, corporate media.

Recently, however, Bennett and Iyengar (2008) argued that due to political polarization, self-selection, and a highly personalized and fragmented mediascape made increasingly possible by technological innovations, traditionally conceived media effects may be less and less evident.

This claim has been contested, though, and Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010) specifically detailed how new technologies could "facilitate changes in the flow of political information" and that Web 2.0 has already dramatically transformed journalism. As such, another development worthy of consideration is that the availability of news online has had a nonpositive effect upon the profits of many traditional news outlets (Gentzkow, 2007; Kirchhoff, 2009). Although this outcome has potential implications for the vitality, robustness, and accuracy of information available in the public sphere, there remains a prevailing sense that the Internet in general, and Web 2.0 in particular, are likely beneficial for discursive information flows and democratic mobilization (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008).

Accordingly, the use of the Internet in general and Web 2.0 applications specifically by voters and politicians alike has received increased scholarly attention. Many studies have documented the increasing popularity of Web 2.0 (Gueorgieva, 2008; Pew Research Center, 2009) or measured its features and users (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; boyd & Ellison, 2007) but few have jointly examined the specific effects of these newer forms of media on political knowledge, interest, or voting behavior in election campaigns (one exception is Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). Thus, the purpose of this study is to measure the impact of these emerging media forms on political involvement and thereby fill a crucial gap in the study of computer-mediated political communication. The upcoming sections review prior research on Web 2.0 applications in the context of political uses and effects, paying particular attention to the use of weblogs, social networking sites (SNS), online video and candidate websites.

Weblogs

In one of the first systematic studies of weblog—or blog—users, Johnson and Kaye (2004) found, perhaps surprisingly, that blogs were perceived as more credible than traditional media sources. Since then, these results were reaffirmed by Johnson, Kaye, Bichard, and Wong (2007), who again found that "blogs were judged as moderately credible, but as more credible than any mainstream media or online source" (p. 1). Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, and Shah (2010) further noted that "blog readers are involved in a range of participatory activities, both online and offline, and that these two spheres are highly complementary and mutually supportive" (p. 45). Similarly, Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues (2007) found that among blog authors, online news use was the strongest predictor on what they called offline expressive communication activities such as writing a letter to the editor or displaying a campaign sticker.

It is clear that blogs have become an established component of American political culture. Although some scholars position blogs as indispensable political tools that make important, beneficial contributions to democracy (Perlmutter, 2008), others are skeptical about their usefulness and impact. Notably, Bimber (2001) concluded that such information technologies may have a negligible influence on democratic politics, especially in terms of political participation. Another related study found that celebrity blogs have significant effects on the level of political cynicism as well as political information efficacy (Sweetser & Kaid, 2008), which may be due to the fact that bloggers often have strong partisan positions and tend to disproportionately favor the issue stances of a particular candidate rather than seek out multiple views or sources (da Cunha Recuero, 2008). Along the lines of content, Baum and Groeling (2008) found the popular blogs *Daily Kos* and *Free Republic* "demonstrate clear and strong preferences for news stories that benefit the party most closely associated with their own ideological orientations"

(p. 359). Similarly, Roodhouse (2009) concluded that blogs may serve as little more than an echo chamber to the established media channels.

In spite of the partisan nature of blogs and bloggers, it has been shown that those who read blogs exhibit higher participation in politics than non–blog readers (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010). Indeed, a growing body of evidence has now suggested that blog use is one of several important predictors of political discussion, involvement, and community building, especially in the online domain (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005). In his book on the topic, Perlmutter (2008) recognized that "bloggers tend be both more passionate about their politics and more partisan than the average voter" (p. 38) but argued that blogs may enhance democratic politics, precisely because they increase the breadth of opinions in the public sphere and can reach a vast audience either directly or indirectly through mainstream media, as Chadwick (2006) described. Considering previous research has largely concluded that blog use is associated with increases in forms of civic participation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: More frequent use of political blogs for presidential campaign news will be associated with higher levels of political involvement.

SNS

SNS have been defined by boyd and Ellison (2007) as websites that

allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Recently, one SNS—Facebook—became the most visited website in the United States (Pepitone, 2010) and the role of other SNS such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr in U.S. politics has likewise been growing.

Williams and Gulati (2007) found that the number of Facebook supporters had a positive effect on incumbents' vote shares in the 2006 House races. Their findings were extended to the 2008 presidential nomination race and showed that relative Facebook strength in a state was a significant predictor of vote share for presidential nominees (Williams & Gulati, 2008). Another study of Facebook sampled college students and found a "moderate, positive relationships between intensity of Facebook use and students' life satisfaction, social trust, civic participation and political engagement" (Valenzuela et al., 2008, p. 2). Sanson (2008) also reported some notable virtues of Facebook during the 2008 campaign, specifically that it had the capability to increase political information, interest, and mobilization among young and previously disenfranchised voters.

In their study of Myspace and the 2008 election, one conclusion that Ancu and Cozma (2009) reached was that "voters with high levels of campaign involvement go to Myspace for information seeking or other cognitive needs rather than for social utility" (p. 578), which suggests positive effects of SNS on highly politically mobilized individuals as well. More generally, Pettingill (2008) reported that the participatory culture brought to bear among the Millennial generation through different forms of social media has, in itself, come to fulfill

a proxy-type of civic engagement that can have meaningful, real-world outcomes. In sum, prior research has suggested that the increased popularity of SNS across all demographics, but especially the young (Wells & Dudash, 2007), has stimulated a positive relationship between SNS use and politics. Therefore the next hypothesis predicted:

> H2: More frequent use of social networking websites for presidential campaign news will be associated with higher levels of political involvement.

Online Video Sites

American voters visited online video websites for political news on a regular basis during the 2008 election cycle. In fact, 24% of Americans reported seeing something about the 2008 campaign in an online video and a portion of those in younger age groups used YouTube itself as a source of campaign information (Kohut, Keeter, Doherty, & Dimock, 2008). It is also interesting to note that YouTube was the most frequently linked to site from those Facebook users who posted on candidate walls in the 2008 presidential election (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2009). Using time-series analysis, Wallsten (2008) demonstrated that "viral" YouTube videos and blog discussions reciprocally Granger-cause one another.

Overall, scholars have found "strong integration of the Web 2.0 and online media technologies of social networking, online video, and blogs" (Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2009), which makes it reasonable to consider similar effects from online video sites as other forms of Web 2.0 media. Yet there is little research explicitly linking the use of YouTube (or other online video sharing sites) to voter learning, interest, or political behavior, though McKinney and Rill (2009) did find that watching the CNN/YouTube debates significantly lowered political cynicism among young voters. Kann, Berry, Grant, and Zager (2007) noted that YouTube was a modal component of online participation and suggested that it "creates opportunities for youth involvement in politics and provides a measure of motivation, facilitation, and invitation for that involvement."

Likewise, Jones's (2009) analysis positioned YouTube as "the popular media that provided the primary conduit for public engagement," and Sayre, Bode, Shah, Wilcox, and Shah (2010) empirically demonstrated that YouTube can Granger-cause other traditional media agendas. Considering these integrative findings, it is proposed that this form of online media will generally have a positive political influence on citizens such that:

> H3: More frequent use of online video sites for presidential campaign news will be associated with higher levels of political involvement.

Candidate Web Sites

Because party Web sites have been found to "play a distinctive role in the process of political communications" (Norris, 2003, p. 21), a number of studies have focused specifically on the use of candidate websites in the context of politics and elections. Of course, not every candidate website featured Web 2.0 technologies, but during the 2008 campaign, both barackobama.com and johnmccain.com were relatively replete with such Web 2.0 features (MacGillis, 2008; Talbot, 2008), despite the somewhat famously reported fact that McCain did not check e-mail

(Nagourney & Cooper, 2008). Previous research has identified that political candidates' personal characteristics often shape their online presence (Herrnson, Stokes-Brown, & Hindman, 2007) and that the features of candidate websites themselves are influenced by practical and strategic factors, including the competitiveness of campaign, which Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin (2007) reported as leading to more sophisticated presentation technologies but less interactivity.

The impact of candidate websites on elections can be quite noticeable in terms of political practices and outcomes. For instance, Gibson and McAllister (2006) estimated that having a website increased a candidate's share of the vote even after controlling for financial resources and competition. In a related study of candidates' websites, Owen and Davis (2008) found that citizens used the websites of George W. Bush and John Kerry in the 2004 election largely for reinforcement of candidates' issue positions or personal characteristics as well as mobilizing information that could facilitate offline campaign participation. Based on this evidence and similar results from related studies (see Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003; Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005) it seems likely that visiting candidate websites will have a positive overall impact on potential voters. Thus, the following final hypothesis is advanced:

H4: More frequent use of candidate websites for presidential campaign news will be associated with higher levels of political involvement.

METHODS

A preelection telephone survey was conducted between October 16 and October 30, 2008, to examine the hypotheses posed. This survey drew upon a statewide random sample of Iowa residents. Although the role the state of Iowa plays in the election process positions this population as a vital one to consider in American elections, there are certainly limitations on generalizability from this sample. Thus, this study does not attempt to claim that the results can be generalized to the entire nation but rather examines the state of Iowa as just one cross-section in the context of national and international trends in online media uses and effects.

A randomized, list-assisted sample of residential telephone numbers was utilized by trained interviewers from a large midwestern university research institution to collect data from questionnaires that averaged 8 min per call to complete. Limitations exist, of course, when drawing such samples—especially with the explicit purpose of examining online media uses—but it is worth noting that that only approximately 17% of the U.S. population had *only* cellular phones at the time of the 2008 election (Pew Research Center, 2008b). The penetration rate of landlines is likely even stronger considering that good portions of the state are rural and have weak cellular phone coverage. Thus, we believe that this technique is effective in drawing a representative random sample of Iowa residents. The survey was successfully completed by 561 adults older than age 18, which resulted in a response rate of 30.9% and a maximum possible sampling variation of plus or minus 4.1 percentage points with a 95% confidence interval.

This survey employed a battery of media use questions that followed the pioneering work of Drew and Weaver on the effects of media use in American elections from 1988 to 2004 (Drew & Weaver, 2006). As such, the questions used here were patterned explicitly from those used by Drew and Weaver in identifying how much attention they paid to campaign news from

each media type, including radio news and talk shows, newspapers, television news, ads and talk shows, and the number of debates viewed using Likert-type scales (see Drew & Weaver, 2006).

In addition to these measures are items that examined respondents' uses of Web 2.0 applications in the form of weblogs, SNS, online video sites, and candidate websites for presidential campaign news. Respondents were asked how frequently they visited each type of website, with answer options including *never*, *hardly ever*, *sometimes*, and *regularly* that were based on online media use questions in a recent Pew Research Center (2008a) study. It should be noted that the scale for each of the four Web 2.0 variables identified was collapsed from a 4-point to a 3-point scale because less than 5.0% of the respondents reported using any of these Web 2.0 technologies "regularly." Thus, the categories of *sometimes* and *regularly* were combined into one category so each of the online media measures effectively operated on 3-point scales of *never*, *rarely*, or *sometimes/regularly*.

This survey also examined how knowledgeable respondents were about the issue positions of John McCain and Barack Obama with four questions, which is also modeled after Drew and Weaver (2006). Here, respondents were asked to indentify which candidate supported a certain position on the top four "extremely important" issues (energy, economy, Iraq, and healthcare) from a July 2008 Gallup poll. These four questions begin by stating, "Which candidate, John McCain or Barack Obama ... " and proceeded with either/or answers on the topics where McCain and Obama maintained disparate positions throughout the campaign on these issues, which were high on the public agenda at large (Gallup, 2008). As such, these items were added together to create a scale of campaign issue knowledge. Because each correct response was worth 1 point on this additive scale, the possible range of the campaign issue knowledge measure was from 0 (*no issue positions questions correct*) to 4 (*all issue positions correct*).

Additional questions included respondents' assessments on Likert-type scales that gauged their overall level of interest in the 2008 presidential campaign as well as their likelihood of voting on Election Day. The campaign interest measure was weighted to range from 0 (*no interest*), to 1 (*somewhat interested*), to 2 (*very interested*), and vote likelihood was similarly scaled 0 (*won't vote*), 1 (*might vote*), 2 (*probably vote*), and 3 (*definitely vote*). Together, these measures of campaign knowledge, interest, and vote likelihood were combined into an index of political involvement with a range from 0 (*no issue positions correct, very low interest, will not vote*) to 9 (*all issue positions correct, very high interest, will definitely vote*). The additive process of this scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.60$) brought together several important though not completely exhaustive concepts for analytic parsimony and builds upon previous research that has treated campaign knowledge, interest, and voting behavior similarly in constructing a scale of political involvement (Huddy & Khatib, 2007).

Last, additional items measured political party affiliation, political ideology, age, gender, education, and income. These were introduced as controls in the analyses.

RESULTS

Because the explicit purpose of this study was to examine the role that online media (i.e., Web 2.0 applications) played in the 2008 presidential election, it is important to report that

respondents who indicated that they had no access to Internet were excluded from this study. This reduced the sample size by from 561 to 414 respondents. The adjusted sample of respondents in this study had an average of 52.6 years and a median of 53.0 years (with a skewness of −0.03). Although the median age is somewhat greater than the national median voter age of 45.0 years (Barone, 2008), the average figure observed here is actually younger than the 55-year-old average age of Iowa caucus participants (Sullivan, 2007).

Other sociographic characteristics included political party affiliation, where 24.2% self-indentified as Republicans and 35.7% considered themselves affiliated with the Democratic party. A good remainder (31.4%) were self-descried Independents. A somewhat different pattern was observed across self-identified political ideology, where 26.6% reported being politically conservative, just 14.5% reported being liberal, and 24.9% felt they were moderate politically, regardless of party affiliation. Women were a clear majority (67.4%) of this sample, and the average household income was between $35,000 and $50,000 per year. On average, the majority of respondents had completed some college or postsecondary technical training and 46.4% had earned a bachelor's degree or pursued or earned graduate degrees.

The average levels of traditional and online media use for this sample are summarized in Table 1 along with their average level of political involvement for the 2008 election. Altogether, these mean figures demonstrate varying levels of attention to media formats and a relatively high level of political involvement (7.50 on a scale with a range from 0 to 9).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that more frequent use of political blogs for presidential campaign news would be associated with higher levels of political involvement. A one-way analysis

TABLE 1
Means of Traditional Media Use, Online Media Use, and
Political Involvement

Variable	M (SD)
Newspaper attention[a]	2.61 (1.15)
Radio news attention	2.31 (1.16)
Radio talk show attention	1.70 (1.12)
TV news attention	3.16 (1.00)
TV campaign commercials attention	2.36 (0.96)
TV talk show attention	2.10 (1.23)
Internet news attention	2.08 (1.21)
Debate exposure[b]	2.47 (1.47)
Weblog website frequency[c]	1.24 (0.60)
Social networking website frequency	1.15 (0.48)
User-posted video website frequency	1.25 (0.62)
Candidate website frequency	1.34 (0.69)
Political involvement[d]	7.50 (1.66)
N	414

[a]Media attention measures use scales ranging from 1 (*no attention*) to 4 (*a lot of attention*). [b]Out of four debates in the 2008 election. [c]Frequency of use measures use scales ranging from 1 (*never*) to 3 (*sometimes/regularly*). [d]Involvement ranges from 0 (*no knowledge/no interest/won't vote*) to 9 (*full knowledge/very high interest/definitely vote*).

of variance (ANOVA) returned results that approached statistical significance, $F(2) = 2.79$, $p = .06$. Of interest, weblog use demonstrated a curvilinear pattern with political involvement. Those that reported "never" using blogs for campaign information had an average involvement level of 7.42, which rose to 8.09 among "rare" blog users and then declined to 7.50 among respondents that relied on blogs "sometimes or regularly" for campaign information. Generally, this finding offers partial support for this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2 expected that more frequent use of social networking websites for presidential campaign news would be associated with higher levels of political involvement. No empirical support was observed for this hypothesis, as ANOVA results were nonsignificant, $F(2) = 1.67$, $p = .19$. Among this sample, SNS were not significantly related to political involvement.

The third hypothesis advanced the idea that more frequent use of online video sites for presidential campaign news would be associated with higher levels of political involvement. There was more clear support for this hypothesis, as nonusers of online video sites had an average political involvement level of 7.41, which was significantly less than that of rare and more regular users that both averaged 8.00 on the political involvement scale, $F(2) = 3.49$, $p = .03$. This finding offers at least preliminary evidence that the use of online video sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, for example, were useful sources for citizens to engage politically.

The last hypothesis, that more frequent use of candidate Web sites for presidential campaign news would be associated with higher levels of political involvement, also found good support when analyzed with a one-way ANOVA, $F(2) = 11.47$, $p = .00$. Here, the use of candidate websites seemed to be clearly linked to augmented political involvement. Those that reported having "never" visited a candidate website averaged 7.30 on the involvement scale used here. That average figure increased to 8.21 among "rare" users of candidate websites and then again to 8.23 for those that visited these sites "sometimes or regularly."

On the whole, these results seem to generally support the idea that Web 2.0 online media may, indeed, have had a positive influence on political involvement among the electorate. Three of the four hypotheses advanced demonstrated at least partial support among a sample of somewhat older citizens that used these media formats on a fairly infrequent basis. When controlling for other factors, however, a different pattern can be observed.

In a standard ordinary least squares regression model that included demographic measures, political beliefs, traditional media usage, and online media usage, only one of the four Web 2.0 variables was statistically significant. Of interest, this finding was indicative of a *negative* relationship between weblog frequency and political involvement ($B = -.29$, $p < .05$). Thus, when holding all else equal, increased blog use was actually related to lower levels of political involvement, which is directionally opposed to the predictions of H1. The other hypotheses also went unsupported in the form of nonsignificant results when controlling for other germane factors modeled here.

This regression model produced an adjusted R^2 of 0.30 and returned a number of other statically significant predictors of political involvement. These predictors included being more educated ($B = .22$, $p < .001$), reporting a moderate ($B = .49$, $p < .05$) or liberal ($B = .52$, $p < .05$) political ideology, and being a Democrat ($B = .71$, $p \le .01$). Several traditional media use measures, including attention to newspapers for campaign news ($B = .15$, $p < .05$) and number of debates watched ($B = .20$, $p < .001$) also proved to be statistically significant. Although the findings derived from this regression model (summarized in Table 2) did not support our hypotheses, it is important to note that general attention to campaign news on

TABLE 2
Regression Analysis of Variables Predicting Political Involvement

Predictor Variables	Coefficient (B)	SE
Demographics		
Age	−.00	.01
Gender (being male)	.10	.16
Education	.22***	.06
Income	.04	.04
Political ideology and affiliation		
Conservative	.08	.21
Moderate	.49*	.19
Liberal	.52*	.24
Republican	.26	.29
Independent	.24	.27
Democrat	.71**	.28
Traditional media usage		
Radio campaign news attention	.07	.07
Radio campaign talk show attention	.12	.08
Newspaper campaign news attention	.15*	.07
TV campaign news attention	.13	.09
TV campaign commercials attention	.10	.08
TV campaign talk show attention	−.05	.07
Debates attention	.20***	.06
Online media usage		
Internet campaign news attention	.24***	.07
Weblog website frequency	−.29*	.14
Social networking website frequency	−.16	.16
User-posted video website frequency	.06	.14
Candidate website frequency	.15	.12
Adjusted R^2	.30	
N	406	

Note. Table reports unstandardized beta coefficients; listwise deletion.
*$p < .05$. **$p ≤ .01$. ***$p ≤ .001$.

the Internet was also a positive and statistically significant ($B = .24$, $p < .001$) predictor of political involvement.

Based on the prevailing findings in previous research, it is of course surprising to find that increased blog use was not positively related to political involvement. This was investigated further by first constructing a regression model that set Web 2.0 media use as the dependent variable to investigate the possibility that political involvement might predict the use of blogs, SNS, online video sites, and candidate websites. There was no support for this because political involvement was not a significant predictor of these online media applications.

Second, additional analytic models considered partisanship as it related to the frequency of weblog use and political involvement. Here, a univariate ANOVA collapsed respondents into groups of partisans and nonpartisans. The partisan group comprised respondents that indicated they were both liberal and Democrat or conservative and Republican. Nonpartisans were identified by indicating no political party affiliation and being neither liberal nor conservative.

The interaction of this analysis returned nonstatistically significant results, $F(2, 249) = .25$, $p = .78$, partial $\eta_p^2 = .00$, observed power $= .09$, which suggests that blog use, partisanship, and political involvement do not intersect with one another meaningfully.

However, a main effect of partisanship was observed, $F(1, 249) = 4.27$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta_p^2 = .02$, observed power $= .54$, in which partisans were, on average, more politically engaged than nonpartisans. Although this is not surprising in itself, the patterns of political involvement were very similar for partisans and nonpartisans across blog use (thus explaining the nonsignificance of the interaction posed). Those that never use blogs for campaign information purposes have the lowest level of political involvement, which then rises among "rare" blog users and diminishes drastically for partisans and nonpartisans that consult blogs more regularly. These relationships are summarized graphically in Figure 1.

Taking into account these findings and those of the regression model where there was a differentiation in political involvement based on political affiliation and ideology, another analytic test examined these roles. Here, a univariate ANOVA compared only the most potent groups of the most strongly partisan respondents as their weblog use may have interacted with their respective levels of political involvement. Therefore, only those respondents that reported being both "liberal" and "Democrat" were included in a between-subjects analysis with those that indicated they were both "conservative" and "Republican." Although the interaction of this analysis returned results that only approached statistical significance, $F(2, 113) = 2.36$, $p = .10$, partial $\eta_p^2 = .04$, observed power $= .47$, it is clear that blog use among conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats was quite different.

Increased use of weblogs among liberal Democrats was related to a general increase in political involvement that dipped only slightly (by an average of .03 units) among those that relied on blogs the most among this group. In other words, liberal Democrats who never read
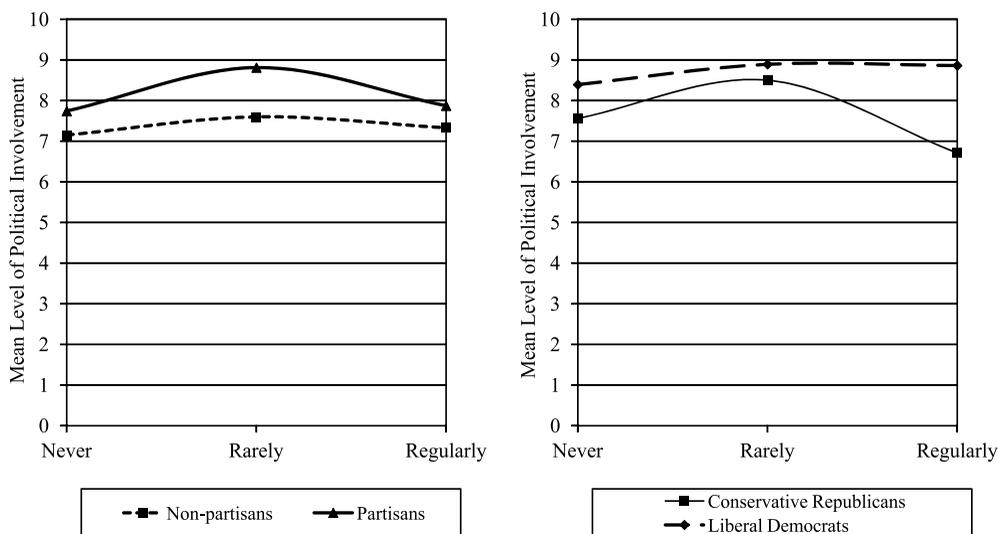

FIGURE 1   Relationships Between Levels of Political Involvement, Weblog Use, and Partisanship. *Note.* The "Regularly" category is an abbreviated term for the combined measure of "Sometimes/Regularly."

blogs were less politically engaged than those who read blogs rarely, sometimes, or regularly, and increased blog use from the rare category to the more regular use category was not related to a meaningful decline in political involvement. Among conservative Republicans, however, blog use demonstrated a curvilinear effect upon political involvement that imitated the partisanship pattern already reported in this study. As also shown in Figure 1, conservative Republicans who went to blogs for campaign news and information sometimes or regularly had a level of political involvement even *less* than those who never went visited blogs during the campaign.

To parse this unexpected finding further, the component measures of the political involvement scale were separately analyzed. Although campaign interest and vote likelihood both returned nonsignificant results as each related to weblog use among liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans, campaign issue knowledge demonstrated a significant interaction that seems to have driven the negative relationship between blog use and political involvement. Within this univariate ANOVA, $F(2, 113) = 3.47$, $p = .04$, partial $\eta_p^2 = .06$, observed power $= .64$, conservative Republicans who went to blogs sometimes or regularly correctly answered (on average) only two of four campaign issue knowledge questions. This was significantly lower than the average knowledge levels of not only liberal Democrats across all blog use groups but also conservative Republicans who never (2.89) or rarely (3.50) read weblogs for campaign news.

Altogether, three of the four Web 2.0 technologies analyzed here showed no statistically significant direct effects when controlling for demographic, political identification, and media factors. The one technology that did have such an effect, blogs, actually depicted a curvilinear relationship where the highest level of weblog use was related to lower levels of political involvement in general and campaign issue knowledge in particular. This finding was linked to partisanship and the strength of ideological political affiliation. For the purposes of this study, it thus is worth noting again that none of hypotheses were supported under more rigorous statistical examination, and the basic premise that Web 2.0 technologies had a transformative effect on most American citizens was not evident among this sample of Iowa citizens.

Without dismissing the potential of online media to restructure campaign processes, the findings reported here suggest that, at least during the 2008 campaign, the reach of their influence on some citizens' political knowledge, interest, and voting behavior may still have been somewhat limited or simply self-selected.

DISCUSSION

Although numerous pundits, theorists, and policymakers are fairly optimistic about the potential of online media technologies to transform the democratic public sphere (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Lawrence et al., 2010; Perlmutter, 2008; Sanson, 2008), it seems that such expectations may be somewhat premature—or at least not generalizable to the entire nation, as Zhang et al. (2010) also found. Considering the findings just presented, it is quite difficult to conclude that more frequent use of online media technologies by citizens in the 2008 campaign were politically transformative at the informational, attitudinal, or behavior levels for the respondents analyzed in this study. In fact, the present study found a negative relationship between blog use and political involvement (and specifically issue knowledge) in which the frequency of blog use indicated a curvilinear, inverted U-shaped relationship with those concepts. What this finding

suggests is that those who more regularly visited blogs were actually less informed compared to those who rarely or never read blogs for campaign information, and these differences were even more pronounced among partisans.

Although it is, of course, not our contention that reading blogs actually caused people to be less knowledgeable or politically involved, this finding does suggest that information seeking on blogs might not be particularly productive, especially for strong political partisans and among older individuals such as those studied here. The relatively low levels of online media use also suggests that our sample population may not be as familiar with the medium, which might further contribute to confusion rather than clarity when evaluating information reported on blogs.

This finding may also be related to the fact that, as Johnson and Kaye (2004) acknowledged, blog users and bloggers themselves may not be typical American voters. Indeed, many bloggers can be classified as political activists that tend to hold strong partisan views to begin with (Perlmutter, 2008). Although on average Republicans, Democrats, and Independents visited blogs at roughly equivalent levels in this study, $F(2, 375) = 2.33$, $p = .10$, previous research suggests that they were likely to gravitate toward blogs that share their own political and ideological positions (Adamic & Glance, 2005). This proposition is further supported by a postelection survey conducted by Pew Research Center (2009), which found that one third of those who use the Internet for political purposes report that when they go online to get political information they tend to visit websites that share their personal point of view.

Similar findings reported by Lawrence et al. (2010) also showed that blog users tend to seek out blogs that reinforce their own political beliefs and rarely have a "balanced" blog diet—in other words, reading both left- and right-wing blogs. Reading one-sided partisan information on political blogs may not expose individuals to the range of issues discussed in any particular campaign. Thus, far from approximating the idealized public sphere of Habermas (1989), weblog use actually seems to have had a narrowing effect on campaign issue knowledge among respondents in this study. This effect was especially noticeable among conservative Republicans who used blogs most frequently in this study, which seems to have very clear linkages to the type of information they are seeking and consuming. In this regard, the patterns of possible political effects for newer forms of online media such as weblogs and SNS seem to demonstrate similarities with previous findings on misperceptions and media use such as those reported by Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis (2003).

When considering SNS in this study, there was a lack of significant effects related to their use in relation to political involvement. Among the statewide sample analyzed here, these applications did not seem to contribute to voter knowledge, interest in the campaign, or political participation in a meaningful, positive manner. The most plausible explanation for this lack of significance may be that the survey respondents were older and rather infrequent users of social media. Nonetheless, Pew Research Center (2009) data also corroborate that Facebook and similar SNS are primarily used by a relatively young age group at the present time. Although social media are gaining popularity in all age brackets, younger Americans still constitute the majority of users, and thus SNS may not have impacted the 2008 election to the extent popularly reported.

For the time being, as Williams and Gulati (2007) suggested, it may be useful to position SNS and the number of supporters online as a proxy for overall enthusiasm for a candidate's campaign, which does not necessarily translate into measurable behavior outcomes. Still, it is

important to note that the potential impact of SNS is likely to increase as regular users of SNS become more involved in the political process both online and offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2007).

Another politically promising and popular Web 2.0 technology is online user-generated video websites, yet the frequency of using sites such as YouTube was only statistically significant when not controlling for other factors in this study. Perhaps due to the older and presumably less Internet-savvy population sampled here, we observed a very low frequency of use of online video. Again, it is prudent to keep in mind that such sites are only likely to increase in popularity as predictions of "an explosion of video sharing during the next election cycle" abound (Gueorgieva, 2008), which would increase the potential for more evident media effects. Similar to other forms of online media studied here, it may be too early to tell what the true impact of online video sites will be on American voters. For this election, it can be concluded that such sites did not augment political involvement among this sample of Iowa residents.

In addition, though these technologies converged on candidates' websites, increased use of those sites did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships when holding all else equal in this study. Although there does seem to be a positive relationship between visiting candidate websites and political involvement, the noneffect in the regression model might well be related to a relatively low level of use. Nonetheless, there is some reason for optimism about online media based on the fact that increased attention to campaign news on the Internet did positively predict political involvement.

The effects of previously "new" media have not proven to be technologically determined (Groshek, 2009) and despite the prevailing optimism in relevant literature, there is still little empirically based evidence that Web 2.0 (or beyond) will be inherently useful politically. Support for such an argument is already evident in this study, where more regular weblog use for political purposes was negatively related to political involvement through campaign issue knowledge. Overall, though, this effect can be considered an unintentional byproduct of increased partisan information seeking in a specific communication (blog) environment with an abundance of information channels that are, at least individually, far from pluralistic. To this point, it was demonstrated that political blogs from the 2004 election were densely linked to one another based on ideology (Adamic & Glance, 2005), which suggests these online communities are highly partisan and limited in diversity of opinions. This basic finding about the partisan characteristics of blogs and bloggers has been consistently supported (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Lawrence et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2009) yet the advocacy of this communication is often not qualified or considered with respect to relevant information functions or solutions.

Previously, partisanship has been understood to stabilize as citizens actively select and expose themselves to more forms of media (Zaller, 1989) even though strong partisans may be less inclined to acquire or accept new information (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Larcinese, 2009). As an information source, blogs are tightly constructed in ideological viewpoints where participants self-select and as a result, are more apt to conform to the blog community. In short, merely increasing the volume of political information alone is not likely to have beneficial political effects because content, environment, and individual characteristics are all factors that warrant consideration. This study bears that position out and also raises a cautionary flag.

In an election where Web 2.0 media were ascribed considerable influence, the only significant relationship observed in the regression analysis involved blogs, and that relationship was not

positive, though it is worth noting that Internet use in general was positive and statistically significant. It could just be that online social media have not reached a large-enough percentage of the population (as general Internet access and political uses seem to have), specifically among the respondents sampled here, to demonstrate positive effects—or it could be that we are entering an era of minimal and partisan-driven media effects in political communication (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008).

Indeed, when considering the many overlapping features that blogs share with other forms of social media, it is possible that the findings here could signal more diminishing political returns of online media in the future. Although the political outcomes of such media have yet to be fully understood, there do appear to be limitations on the positive political impacts of this ongoing media evolution. At least for this sample of respondents analyzed during the 2008 American election campaign, these forms of online media did not augment political involvement when taking into account other predictive factors—and increased blog usage was related to a decline in campaign knowledge. With this in mind, scholars and citizens should approach the political agency of online media with an understanding of its potential dualism.

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