2013-05-07

The Effect of Social Media on Civic Engagement

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/5445

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Introduction

“The most serious danger Americans now face, greater than terrorism, is that our country’s future may not end up in the hands of a citizenry capable of sustaining the liberty that has been America’s most precious legacy.” (Damon, 2011) According to many, the younger generation of today is seen as politically unmotivated, uneducated, and uninterested. Declining levels of civic engagement have incited panic and have caused people to question the strength of American democracy. “If trends continue, young Americans will grow up without an understanding of the benefits, privileges, and duties of citizens in a free society, and without acquiring the habits of character needed to live responsibly in one.” (Damon, 2011) The conclusion drawn by many is that the younger generation’s lack of participation is a direct result of their lack of interest, respect, or any semblance of appreciation for politics and civic engagement more broadly. (Coley, 2012) If this is true, it certainly is a cause for panic, but are young people today really isolated and removed from the world of politics? Do they not feel a need to give back or participate in their community? This paper proposes that the question is not one of waning motivation or interest, but instead a matter of changing forums for action. Is it that the millennial generation has become less civically engaged or is it that forms of civic engagement have shifted in such a way that interests and motivations are not rewarded with the same recognition? Civic engagement is defined here as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.” (APA, 2012) To understand the supposed lack of interest among the young, millennial generation, attention must be paid to the changing nature and environment in which civic engagement is occurring. The supposed terror that will ensue when the country is left in the hands of the millennials must be understood not as a consequence of disinterest or lack of involvement, but instead as a consequence of a changing world in which civic engagement has been relegated to the cyber realm through social media and the internet.

The goal of this paper is to shift the discussion of civic engagement away from focusing solely on an individual’s intention or motivation for volunteering, and instead to focus on the resulting action or lack there-of. A shift is needed from considering just the individual-level determinants of civic engagement to focusing on technological and societal-wide changes. The millennials now coined “digital natives” are a generation that have become increasingly linked and dependent on the Internet and social media. Current American teens and “twenty-somethings,” are history’s first always-connected generation. 90% of the millennial generation uses the Internet and 75% have social networking profiles. In response, efforts from all angles to engage this generation have increasingly moved into the cyber world, which raises the question of whether increasing social media use is a response by the millennial generation to the changing nature of elite mobilization. Elite mobilization that has decreased the effective cost of participation and consequently increased the overall level of participation. (Rosenstone, Hansen 1993) In education, we see the expansion of online courses and the introduction of increasing technology in the classroom. With regards to businesses, we see the explosion of online
marketing and targeted advertisements bombarding millennials through Facebook, email, and Twitter. And with civic engagement we see an increasing number of voluntary associations spending their limited capital to enhance their online presence.

The assumption often is that this increased use of the Internet and social media is nothing, but positive. Information is more widely available as well as “cheaper” (in terms of time and actual cost) for the reader to access. Remaining constantly “plugged-in” grants members of the millennial generation a global perspective, an all-access pass to every corner of the world and a wealth of information at the tip of their fingers. But at what cost? What do the Millennials lose as a result of being surrounded by ways to passively engage with the world around them?

This paper aims to uncover what, if any, difference exists between the ways an individual interacts with a social media campaign as compared to a conventional news article.¹ An original survey experiment is utilized to examine whether the way in which a person hears about a charity affects the way they chose to engage with that charity. If a person hears about Doctors Without Borders or Medicines Sans Frontieres through Facebook are they more or less likely to donate than if they had stumbled upon their website and read an article about them? Using the conventional wisdom surrounding social media, many would argue that a social media campaign helps promote awareness and therefore would serve to only benefit the charity. The data reveals however that greater awareness does not inherently lead to greater action. In the survey experiment, respondents who received the article treatment were significantly more likely to engage² with Doctors Without Borders when compared to those respondents who received the Facebook treatment.

It is not the author’s intent to claim that the increased popularity of the Internet is an inherently negative change in news dissemination. The author is able to readily accept the notion that social media makes news more widely accessible and available at a lower cost. What the author questions is how an individual’s engagement with the news changes depending on where they hear about a story. At a time when civic engagement is being consistently moved to online venues, the possibility that individuals are less likely to engage with an article if they find it through social media is significant. As the generation that is always connected and always plugged-in, the Millennials are left surrounded by news, but news that engages them in only the most passive of ways.

¹ An important note is that the experiment examines the effect of an online article. The format is thus more similar to that of an online post, rather than a hardcopy, in-print article. Key structural differences do remain between the article and the social media treatments, which upholds the integrity of the experiment. Both treatments are included in the appendix.

² Engagement includes donating to the charity, sharing the information with a friend, commenting on the story, writing a letter to the campaign, or being able to answer a “quiz” question about the story correctly.
Literature Review

Before turning to the mechanics of the survey experiment utilized and the results found, it is important to understand where this research falls in the broader discussion on civic engagement. It is not a new claim that levels of civic engagement are on the decline or even that such a decline has potentially devastating effects for society.

I. Putnam and the Temporal Decline in Social Capital

Robert Putnam in his famous work *Bowling Alone* analyzes several different measures in determining levels of civic engagement in the United States from 1950-1995. Putnam looks at participation in church or religious groups, voluntary associations, club meetings; voting turnout; the growth of non-profits; and the popularity of organizations such as the Parent Teachers Association. Putnam documents a clear decline in civic engagement. He explains the decline as a result of the “eroding levels of social capital” within the United States. Individuals, according to Putnam, are deriving less and less value from their social networks. He cites several mechanisms by which this erosion has taken place: urban sprawl, increased forms of entertainment (namely the television), changing patterns in free-time and money earned, and key generational differences. The modern way of life has led to competing demands on time and financial capital, often awarding social groups and voluntary associations a low priority. With this influential piece of work in the field, where civic engagement is tied to levels of social capital, one can see how social media may then be seen as a “cure” to the ailing, socially isolated society of today.

II. Social Networking and its Potential Effect on Social Capital and Civic Engagement

Social media has the potential to reinforce and build social capital. Websites like Facebook and Twitter allow for broad social networks to be formed, linking people together from across the globe. Through social media sites individuals are able to reconnect with past friends and form new friendships and relationships. Social media thus has the potential to reinvigorate civic engagement in the United States. The question then is whether this potential power of social media actually manifests itself. Does social media increase levels of social capital and thus boost civic engagement? The literature leaves us with two key hypotheses to test. The literature supporting each of these hypotheses will be explored, followed by an explanation of the experiment utilized in this paper and the way it adds to the literature.

Hypothesis 1 – Social networks increase social capital and decrease cost of participation

As previously discussed in the work of Robert Putnam, one hypothesis substantiated in the literature is the notion that the increased use of social media by the millennial generation should increase civic engagement by increasing levels of collective social capital. Social media brings us together as a society, and thus allows us to more readily act as a collective group. Aaker and Smith build on this notion by arguing, “social networks are particularly effective at increasing motivation.” In their book *the Dragonfly Effect*, Aaker and Smith offer strong support for the notion that social media can make a powerful difference in terms of a business’ success, a charities’ fundraising abilities, and
in electing the current president of the United States. (2010) They pull on the idea that social media helps facilitate increased levels of social capital. The authors tell the story of a Leukemia patient who is able to successfully survive her illness by using social media to run a national bone marrow search and eventually find an almost impossible match who lived thousands of miles away. In addition to the increased levels of social capital facilitated by social media, Aaker and Smith also touch on the way in which social media decreases the effective cost of participation a point also made in the works of Downs and Fiorina.

Similar to Downs’ rational calculus of voting model that sees voting as a paradox, Fiorina recognizes that civic engagement at its core is irrational. Downs highlights the fact that the chance of an individual’s vote affecting the outcome of an election are close to zero, while the costs incurred in the voting process (i.e. getting to the voting booth, finding childcare, etc.) are significant. Why then do people vote? Downs offers the “d-variable” by way of an explanation. The “good-feeling” that someone gets from voting and participating in the democratic process motivates some portions of the population to go out and vote. Fiorina proposes that a similar “expressive benefit” exists in the realm of civic engagement. In addition, they propose that the solution to increasing participation is to decrease the costs of participation or to figure out a way to increase the amount of “good-feeling” received from participating. It can thus be hypothesized that from the works of both Downs and Fiorina, social media would increase participation in civic engagement because it decreases the cost. Individuals are more easily brought together in an online forum; hence social media makes civic engagement easier for the participant. Instead of having to attend a volunteer meeting (i.e. PTA monthly meeting) in person, social media allows for interactions to occur online: web chats, group Skype meetings, etc. As they scroll through their Facebook newsfeed, various issues are made more salient to the individual, with very little effort expanded.

Using the works of Aaker and Smith, Putnam, and Fiorina we would expect to find that social media increases civic engagement by building extensive human networks and increasing levels of social capital, thus resulting in a decrease in the cost to participate.

**Hypothesis 2 – Social networks do not increase social capital and result in more passive forms of engagement**

Of course, on the other side of the argument is the possibility that social media does not increase social capital and thus does not increase levels of civic engagement. In *Bowling Alone* Putnam is very skeptical of the internet’s power to build social capital. However, if we take Putnam and Fiorina’s ideas as a starting point, it is logical that social media by bringing people together should build social capital and increase engagement. We would expect that over the past decade as social media has exploded onto the Internet scene, levels of civic engagement would have increased. However, do social networks provide the incentives for participation that would allow them to facilitate such an increase in engagement? The relationships inherent to social media are weaker than face-to-face interactions and thus carry a smaller degree of social capital. In addition, one must wonder whether social networks provide the resources needed for sustained, effective participation? Evidence collected over the past decade points to continuously declining
levels of civic engagement, which adds credence to this hypothesis that social networks do not increase social capital.

In their report, “Fault Lines in Our Democracy: Civic Knowledge, Voting Behavior, and Civic Engagement in the United States,” the Educational Testing Service analyzes overall levels of civic engagement using the Civic Engagement Index (CEI). The index involves five voting and volunteering activities. An individual is given a score from 0 to 5; 1 point awarded for each activity participated in. The report found that the average score for all U.S. adults was 1.5, “indicating that the average person participated at a rate of 30 percent on these five activities.” In addition, the report finds that civic engagement in the U.S. varies widely across age, education, and income groups. The CEI index rating was 80% higher for 45- to 64-year-olds than for the youngest group (18-24), thus reinforcing Putnam’s original argument that the older generations are more likely to be civically engaged. This also adds to the discussion entertained earlier that the millennial generation is “dropping the ball”. The following table provides a snapshot of civic engagement by age group:

### Table 1: Civic Engagement of U.S. Adults by Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>CEI Index</th>
<th>% Voted in 2004 Presidential Election</th>
<th>% Volunteered with nonprofit government agency</th>
<th>% Volunteered with civic or political organization</th>
<th>% Volunteered with education or health agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-44</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-64</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>70.4</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Educational Testing Services

As the table demonstrates, levels of civic engagement are significantly lower amongst the Millennials as represented by the 18-24 age group.

This data justifies the existence of hypothesis two, which questions the role social media has played in the continuously declining levels of civic engagement observed. If it is a matter of the cost to participate, social media should result in an increase in civic engagement. Why then are levels of civic engagement continuing to decline?

Malcolm Gladwell proposes the explanation that “social networks are effective at increasing participation by lessening the overall level of motivation that participation requires.” (2013) Gladwell looks at the Save Darfur Coalition and their experience with social media campaigns. Gladwell finds that the Facebook page “Save Darfur Coalition” has 1,282,339 members. However, on average each member has donated only $.09 to the cause. As Gladwell describes, “Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.” Gladwell names two primary reasons for why social networking platforms will not be helpful in generating real social change.

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3 Five activities used in the CEI: voted in the 2004 presidential election, voted in the 2006 congressional and state elections, volunteered with a nonprofit or government agency during a one-year period, volunteered with a civic/political organization, volunteered with an education or health related agency during a one-year period.
He claims that effective social movements require sacrifice, which is built on strong bonds between people. Social media makes it possible for individuals to maintain thousands of weak relationships, but the kind of relationship that will re-tweet a message, but not show up to a protest. Social media helps facilitate relationships that utilize very little social capital, which as result, do not promote the same levels of active engagement. The second reason Gladwell provides is that “real social movements require hierarchical organization to be effective- someone has to be strategizing and coordinating.” Social networks by definition are not hierarchical, but based off of a network-like structure. This has benefits such as making them flexible and resilient, but it makes it so they are not particularly well equipped for strategic or goal-oriented action.

Many have responded to Gladwell’s claims accusing him of being too harsh towards social media and its potential effect. These counter-arguments can be understood as defense for hypothesis one and the notion that social media can have a positive impact on civic engagement. It is true that social media involves lots of minor interactions; however, when these minor interactions build on top of one another the result can be an ultimate strengthening of ties. In addition, it is important to highlight the deficiencies in a more traditional, hierarchical structure of a social action group. Hierarchical organizations are vulnerable to outside influences because once the top management is removed, often times the bottom cannot survive. In addition, social media has been seen to play a powerful role in “equalizing” relationships. Information is easily disseminated throughout a social network. “Everyone becomes a product of content, and this function is taken away from central actors susceptible to control by the powerful.” One final counterargument to Gladwell’s claim and further support for hypothesis one is that because of social media it has become significantly harder for things to go unnoticed. In a world in which information cannot be controlled, abuses of power become costlier and more visible to the public eye. As a result, the need for “rising up” or other social movements may diminish.

V. Testing the Role of Social Media in Civic Engagement

This debate surrounding Gladwell’s critiques of social media and its involvement in civic engagement serves as the foundation for the paradox this paper is testing. Based off of the literature, social media should facilitate increasing levels of civic engagement by effectively decreasing the cost associated with such action, but over the past decade levels of civic engagement have continued to decline. This study will break new ground by testing these competing hypotheses with an original experiment, a novel innovation for this literature.
**Methodology**

This paper aims to uncover what, if any effect, social media has on an individual’s degree of civic engagement as measured through their willingness to get involved with a particular charity. As discussed, the literature leaves us with two dominant hypotheses: social media will lead to increased civic engagement by increasing levels of social capital and decreasing the costs of participation or that social media is not able to tap into the necessary levels of social capital and thus leads to only passive forms of engagement. To test the potential effect of social media on civic engagement, this paper utilizes an original experiment that tests the persuasiveness of social media.

It is important to recognize the different ways in which social media can affect public opinion. One such way is through increased news dissemination. Social media can expose people to more information and causes that they might never have heard of in the absence of social media and encourage them to become engaged. One such example can be seen in the recent effort by the Human Rights campaign to “paint the town red” and spread awareness on the day of the Supreme Court decision about legalizing gay marriage. The HRC encouraged supporters of the effort to change their Facebook profile to a pink and red version of the HRC logo that features an equals sign. Facebook reported that compared to average numbers, profile photo uploads were up by 120%. 2.7 million more users changed their photo on Tuesday, March 26th than did on the previous Tuesday. (Stern, 2013) News dissemination is a critical role that Facebook and other social media outlets play in generating awareness and in making particular issues salient in public opinion. However, what happens to this increased level of awareness? Were people more likely to change their opinion in favor of legalizing gay marriage after the HRC’s Facebook campaign? The second potential role social media can play is in proving to be a more effective medium for the communication of information as compared to more traditional news outlets. Are individuals more likely to engage with a social media campaign on a particular issue than they are with a news article?

The experiment utilized in this paper tests the degree to which social media is more or less persuasive than a conventional news source, while leaving the claim of dissemination untested. The reason for doing so stems primarily from the difficulties involved in operationalizing social media’s role in news dissemination. The way in which individuals utilize social media outlets to receive their news information varies so significantly, that attempting to standardize such a process proves close to impossible. In addition, the main puzzle this paper is attempting to uncover is the reason why some individuals chose to actively engage with a particular charity, while others do not. The focus on persuasiveness then allows for a closer examination of the engagement process.

To assess the relative efficacy of appeals for social action through social media versus more traditional media sources, I constructed an original survey experiment. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of two experimental treatments. Both treatments were presented virtually identical information about vital work being done by the same internationally respected charity. However, in one treatment the information was presented within the format of a mock Facebook page, whereas in the other it was presented as a more traditional news article. The experiment then examines whether the respondents assigned to the Facebook treatment became any more engaged with the issue than respondents assigned to the news article treatment.
To craft the treatments, I chose information about Doctors Without Borders (or *Medicines Sans Frontieres*) because of its reputation as a credible, secular and nonpartisan non-profit organization. While social media and networking can take many forms, I chose to model my social networking treatment condition as a Facebook profile, rather than a blog or twitter handle, because Facebook remains the most commonly used social media tool. According to new research from Nielsen’s “The Social Media Report,” American Internet users now devote more time to Facebook than any other website, spending a total of 53.5 billion minutes a month on the world largest social networking site. (Bosker, 2011)

Subjects were recruited to take an online survey via Mechanical Turk. Although the sample is not nationally representative, it remains considerably diverse with regards to gender, age, religious orientation, education level, and political affiliation. Research has shown that respondents recruited through MTurk are often more representative of the U.S. population than in-person convenience samples. (Berinsky, 2012) In addition, a quality check on responses was conducted so that only those respondents who took longer than four minutes to answer the survey were considered. Respondents were randomly assigned to either the Facebook or a article treatments. Summary statistics for the sample’s demographics are presented in the appendix.

The information used to craft the treatments was taken from the Doctors Without Borders website. It tells the story of Mary Marizani the first patient to be cured of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis in Epworth, Zimbabwe. The article tells the story of how Doctors Without Borders treated Mary after she had suffered from her illness for two years. Mary received daily injections and a cocktail of highly toxic pills that eventually proved successful against the multidrug-resistant tuberculosis. Both the Facebook and article treatment included the same headline, picture of Mary and her family, and the same basic facts about the story. The only key difference between the Facebook page and the article was formatting. The newspaper article included slightly more background information than the Facebook page (nothing pertinent to the quiz question asked of all respondents), while the Facebook page included more photographs than the article. Considering the extent that images are more powerful motivators, this experimental design should bias the study against hypothesis two. This decision was made in the attempt to stay true to the unique structural facets of a social media campaign as composed to a conventional news article. Screenshots of both the article and Facebook page are included in the appendix.

The dependent variable in this experiment is measured as the degree to which a subject chose to become engaged with Doctors Without Borders after receiving the treatment. Engagement was measured by a series of questions asked after subjects read through either the Facebook page or the news article. After looking through the online news article, respondents were asked whether they would share the article link with a friend, make a comment on the article, or write a letter to Doctors Without Borders. After looking at two screenshots from the fictional Facebook page, respondents were then asked the same series of questions: whether they would re-post or share the story, comment on the story, or write a letter to Doctors Without Border. The respondents from both treatments were then asked if they were willing to donate to the charity and if so how much. Finally, subjects were asked to recall which illness Mary was able to survive (answer: Multidrug-resistant tuberculosis). Through these questions the experiment was
designed to expose what differences, if any, existed between the way in which respondents from the Facebook treatment differed from that of the article treatment in terms of their willingness to become engaged in the mission of Doctors Without Borders.

In this experiment, civic engagement is operationalized through the respondents’ degree of involvement with the charity Doctors Without Borders. The American Psychological Association defines civic engagement as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.” (2012) Civic engagement thus encompasses a wide range of activities, stemming from volunteer work to political involvement. In choosing Doctors Without Borders; a non-partisan, reputable, and secular charity; I was attempting to stay clear of the entangled web of ideology and partisan identities. It is true that the treatments were randomly assigned, each with a similar demographic make-up, however by staying clear of a political issue, such as voting or working for a campaign, I was attempting to minimize the impact a respondent’s personal beliefs would have on his or her decision to engage with the charity. In addition, I believe that charity involvement reflects a low-cost form of engagement, thus introducing a positive bias with regards to encouraging participant involvement. If I had chosen a higher form of engagement, such as volunteering in person, my worry was that the effect would be too low to observe any potential difference between the two treatments. By focusing on charitable involvement I believe I am uncovering the effect social media has on one important aspect of civic engagement: charitable involvement.
Results

In total 558 survey responses were collected. Responses were counted only if the entire survey was taken. The demographic make-up of the respondent pool is represented in Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1: Respondent Demographic Make-Up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-25 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politically Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Year College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Users</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As previously discussed, after reading about Mary’s story in one of the two formats each respondent was asked what actions he or she would be willing to take. In both the article and Facebook treatments, each respondent had the option of sharing the story link, making a comment at the end of the story, contacting Doctor’s Without Borders directly, or making a donation to the charity.

The experiment was designed so that each respondent was choosing from a similar list of possible actions; however, it is important to highlight how engagement with the Facebook article is fundamentally easier, due to the structural differences inherent to a Facebook model. To comment, share, or send a message an individual does not have to leave Facebook. All of these functions can be completed using the same website. With regards to the article treatment, an individual would need to log into their email to send a letter, log into the Doctor’s Without Border’s website to leave a comment, or log into some type of social media to share the article link (i.e. email, Facebook, Twitter) The nature of Facebook and the low-cost action it encourages should, if anything, bias the results towards hypothesis one and against hypothesis two. This bias was included because it awards the survey experiment a greater degree of external validity. If the results of this experiment are to be considered valid, they must speak to the way in which individuals engage with both Facebook and articles outside of a closed research environment. Facebook encourages low cost action. It was essential to the credibility of the experiment that the survey reflects this important characteristic. However, it is important to note that the dependent variables used to indicate engagement were the same for both treatments. Both treatments had the option to comment, share, write a letter, or donate.

The key findings of the survey experiment are as follows: individuals in the article treatment reflected a significantly higher degree of civic engagement, individuals in the Facebook treatment were significantly less likely to retain and process information about the charity, and age was seen to have no effect on the degree of influence Facebook had on the respondent. Each of these findings will now be discussed in further detail.

Result 1: Article Treatment Reflects Higher Levels of Civic Engagement
Table 2.2 demonstrates the trends in engagement seen within both the article and Facebook treatments. A two-sample t test was used to determine whether the differences in means are statistically significant.

**Table 2.2: Respondent Charitable Engagement by Treatment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Asked</th>
<th>Article (%)</th>
<th>Facebook (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter / Email</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to Donate</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>50.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= 558
p < .01

Respondents, who received the article treatment, were significantly more likely to engage with Doctors Without Borders in four out of the five dependent variables. Article treatment respondents were more likely to indicate their willingness to donate, share their story and contact Doctor’s Without Boarder through an email or letter as compared to respondents in the Facebook treatment. The only exception is the fact that Facebook respondents were more likely to make a comment on the story. It is important to note that commenting is the one form of engagement that is much easier on Facebook. To comment on an article, users most commonly have to create an account on the particular website before they are allowed to comment. In contrast, on Facebook commenting requires no additional action.

In terms of measuring the individual respondent’s level of civic engagement their willingness to donate to the charity serves as a resolute sign of how involved they are willing to be. Sacrificing financial capital is the “highest-cost” form of engagement included in the survey experiment. When the treatments were compared, the article treatment was significantly more persuasive in its ability to convince respondents to donate. 70.1% of respondents in the article treatment group indicated that they would be willing to donate, while only 50.1% of Facebook respondents were willing to donate.

As one can see, the survey experiment reveals that social media did not result in increased levels of civic engagement, thus confirming hypothesis two. In fact, it was the conventional news source, as reflected in the article treatment that proved to increase respondents’ degree of civic engagement.

**Result 2 – Differences in Processing: Facebook treatment respondents are significantly less likely to retain and process information**

After the engagement questions were asked, the survey quizzed respondents to gauge their ability to remember a key detail from the story they read. This allowed the

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4 All four differences in means are statistically significant with a p < .01

5 An important experimental constraint to remember is the fact that respondents did not have to “follow-through” on their pledge of involvement. Further research would be enhanced by designing a way to measure an individual’s willingness to actually donate to a cause or physically interact with the article / Facebook page.
experiment to test a separate dependent variable that speaks to the way in which people process information in an article as compared to information in a social media format.

The information retention question asked respondents to identify what illness Mary was able to survive. The question was made intentionally easy, with the answer being in the title of the story in both the news article and Facebook post: multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. Despite the relative easiness of the question, a significant difference was observed with regards to the article and Facebook treatments. The results are depicted in table 2.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Asked</th>
<th>Article (%)</th>
<th>Facebook (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quiz Question Correct</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>46.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= 558
p < .01

Considering that the answer could be found in the title, the fact that more than half of respondents in the Facebook treatment were unable to answer the question correctly is surprising. Compared to the 66% of respondents in the article treatment that were able to answer the question correctly, those respondents who saw the information in a social media format were significantly less likely to retain the facts they were reading. This finding serves as a clear indication that something about the social media format leads respondents to process the information differently and less comprehensively. Their inability to answer the quiz question correctly reflects a more passive form of engagement with the story.

Turning then to the two hypotheses previously presented in this paper, it is clear that hypothesis one is incorrect. Social media does not lead to increased civic engagement. However, this finding helps uncover a potential mechanism in explaining why hypothesis two is correct. People do not process information and retain it as thoroughly when they hear about it through social media. Why might social media not lead to more engagement?

**Result 3 – No Effect of Age on Facebook’s Influence**

A final question explored was whether a respondent’s age mediates the influence of the Facebook treatment. Based on the literature and public opinion more broadly, the assumption is that Facebook is really an activity seen in the younger generation. Looking at the 562 respondents included in this experiment, 69% of those respondents who identified their age to be either 55 or older also indicated that they have a Facebook. This compares to 100% of the millennials, ages 18-25, who indicated that they have a Facebook. From these contextual realities, one could make the prediction that social media will affect the two age groups differently: older people might become less engaged with seeing information through Facebook because it is a medium they are less-familiar with, while they younger generation might really feel the effect of social media and thus Facebook mobilizes them to become engaged.
Tables 2.3 illustrate the way in which respondents engaged with the charity based on their age. The two categories used are respondents below the age of 34 and respondents aged 35 and older.\(^6\)

**Figure 2.4 – Engagement by Age in the Facebook Treatment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Type</th>
<th>% of Respondents ≤ 34</th>
<th>% of Respondents ≥ 35</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Share</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter / Email</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiz Correction Correct</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to Donate</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the data reflects, there was no significant difference in the way older and younger respondents in the Facebook treatment interacted with Doctors Without Border. Although, a great deal of the literature and public opinion has focused on the notion that “social media is the tool of the Millennials,” this experiment demonstrates that no significant difference exists in the way that social media influences younger and older respondents.

\(^6\) These categories were selected because they resulted in a comparable number of respondents in both the “younger” and “older” groups, which facilitates an effective comparison between the two.
**Case Study – A Charity’s Interaction With Social Media**

The survey experiment utilized in this paper demonstrates the potentially damaging effect of social media on civic engagement. Individuals are less likely to actively engage with a charity when they are presented with the charity’s information on a social media outlet than from a more traditional source. The finding that respondents in the Facebook treatment were significantly less likely to donate to the charity is especially important to non-profits and charities because it raises the question of how effective social media really is in terms of fundraising.

The finances of a non-profit, NGO are often in the limelight. Questions are raised about high overhead costs, questionable donors, complex tax exemptions, etc. With regards to social media, an increasing percentage of a charity’s budget is being spent on re-vamping or in some cases creating an effective social media campaign. In a survey of 1,000 nonprofits conducted by the Nonprofit Technology Network, 86% of the survey organizations used Facebook, which was a 6% increase since the survey was conducted in 2009. 46% of these organizations used social media for fundraising, with 40% of organizations reporting they are getting donations from Facebook. Interestingly, 78% of the organizations that have reported donations through Facebook raised $1,000 or less in the past year. In addition, the researchers in the report point out that “the lack of a clear return on investment is likely holding nonprofits back from deeper financial commitment to social networking.” Yet, 86% of the surveyed organizations are still committed to their social networking campaigns.

With their already limited budgets, why are charities continuing to spend a significant amount of money on developing extensive social media campaigns? The survey experiment conducted has demonstrated that social media does not generate the type of productive engagement a charity is looking for. To bolster this experimental evidence and overcome problems of external validity, I sought out real world data with regards to social media campaigns and charity usage. If charities truly believe that social media efforts will enhance their overall “success,” a correlation should exist between a charity’s total revenue/ fundraising efficiency and their Facebook popularity. In other words, finding strong correlations between a charity’s Facebook presence and their fundraising abilities would not allow us to infer causation. However, if the evidence points to a weak or no correlation between the two, it would cast further doubt on the efficacy of Facebook as a fundraising evidence.

To test this hypothesis, the Forbes 200 largest U.S. Charities list was analyzed. The charity’s total revenue determined their overall success and the number of “likes” on their Facebook page was used to determined the success of their social media campaign. The context in which social media should prove most effective would be in situations when the individual does not have any direct connections to the issue thus increasing the cost of participation. Social media would theoretically make issues aware to the respondent that they may not have discovered on their own. Considering this, the international need charities were chosen over charities with a more domestic focus. The 57 largest international needs charities, based on total revenue in 2011, were coded according to their social media presence. Charities were coded 0 if they did not have a Facebook page and 1 if they did. The number of Facebook followers was then recorded. The full report of this analysis can be found in the Appendix.
The analysis reveals that no such correlation exists between a charity’s total revenue and its success on Facebook. Catholic Charities USA had the largest total revenue, with $4.67 billion, and only 7,697 supporters on Facebook. In contrast, the charity with the most Facebook support, the United States Fund for UNICEF, with 955,229 supporters had a total revenue of 456 million. The non-profit with the next largest Facebook presence is Doctors Without Borders USA with 485,929 supporters and a total revenue of 182 million. What this analysis demonstrates is that a clear correlation does not exist between a charity’s success and their social media campaign, thus casting significant doubt on the notion that social media is a critical fundraising tool for non-profits.
**Conclusion**

The main focus of this paper has been demonstrating the negative effects of the Millennials’ increasing attachment to social media as their media outlet. As a result of the increasing reliance on social media, civic engagement has been relegated to the most passive of forms. Facebook respondents were significantly less likely to donate to Doctors Without Borders and less likely to retain the core message of the article after reading it. But, as briefly touched on earlier, the one piece of this puzzle that this paper does not consider is social media’s role in news dissemination. The fact that although they were not able to remember the specific details or be willing to donate money, Facebook users are introduced to a vast array of charities that they would most likely never have learned about otherwise. Facebook has the powerful ability to generate awareness. The question is how to turn that passive awareness into powerful and concrete civic engagement?

Non-profits are spending an exorbitant amount of money on developing social media campaigns. Their goal: to increase awareness of their charity with the end goal of increasing the overall total power of their charitable effort whether through money or increased social credibility. The problem, as this paper has demonstrated, is that a social media campaign cannot just consist of making a great Facebook page. The link between the Facebook page and the power the non-profit is craving is currently disconnected.

The focus of future work in the field needs to be this link between social media and a charities’ power. How can a social media campaign move beyond just generating awareness and instead motivate people to actively engage in those causes they feel are worth fighting for?
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Appendix

Facebook Treatment

[Image of Facebook page for Doctors Without Borders]

After two grueling years of treatment, Mary Marlizani is our first patient in Zimbabwe to conquer multidrug-resistant TB. While this is great news, we urgently need a treatment that can cure people in less time and with fewer side effects. http://bit.ly/T7oC4J

Refugees in South Sudan take part in one of our mental health programs. “The children are asked to draw what frightens them the most, and almost everyone draws an airplane,” an MSF psychologist explains. http://bit.ly/Sw6XwA
First Patient Cured of Multidrug-Resistant Tuberculosis in Epworth, Zimbabwe

OCTOBER 31, 2012

In her home on the outskirts of Zimbabwe’s capital city, 48-year-old Mary Marizani says that, although she recently became the first Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) patient in the country to conquer multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB), she now faces another challenge: “I have my appetite back and now I am eating everything in sight.”

Mary’s ability to joke has finally been restored following two grueling years of medical treatment for MDR-TB that included daily injections and a cocktail of highly toxic pills that made her vomit, lose her appetite, and hallucinate. “I felt like I had bugs crawling on the inside of my head,” she says.

Mary first showed the symptoms of tuberculosis (TB) in 2006, after caring for four members of her family who had the disease. After eight months of treatment (not with MSF), she was taken off TB medication by a doctor who declared she “looked much better” but never screened her to confirm whether the treatment had been successful.

In the months that followed, Mary was in and out of the hospital with fever and a dry cough she could not shake. Her condition gradually grew worse and she lost half her body weight. Finally, she took the advice of a neighbor and went to a clinic where MSF was treating patients with TB.

For Mary, the treatment came just in time, says Mary’s 24-year-old daughter, Shoral. “Just two days before the MSF doctors came to tell us the good news—that she would go on a new course of drugs—my mother had coughed up half a bucket of blood. It was terrible. I thought she was going to die.”

In the two years since Mary became Epworth’s first MDR-TB patient, the numbers of patients on treatment have grown. Currently, MSF is treating 40 MDR-TB patients at its projects across the country, benefiting from the introduction of a new test for TB drug-resistance, known as GenoExpert, which has cut the time it takes to diagnose someone from 42 days to just two hours.

Now cured, Mary is energetic and sociable again, and she is an inspiration for the other patients at Epworth. For them, she is living proof that the treatment works. “The MDR-TB treatment was a miracle,” says Mary. “MSF lifted me up from my death bed and gave me back my life.”