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### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zp2q3pg>

### Journal

Journal of Communication, 59(3)

### ISSN

0021-9916

### Author

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### Publication Date

2009-09-01

### DOI

10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01436.x

Peer reviewed

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**“Carrying Online Participation Offline” — Mobilization by Radical Online Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties**

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*This study analyzes survey data obtained from members in neo-Nazi and environmentalist discussion forums. It assesses the links between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and two forms of political engagement (Movement Support and Movement Promotion). This study also tests whether perceived political dissimilarity of offline friends and family (core ties) and of more distant interpersonal associates (significant ties) encourages or thwarts political engagement and whether it moderates the influence exerted by online groups. As expected, political engagement among the analyzed respondents increases with online participation, also controlling for extremism, political discussion and news media use. Although dissimilar core ties neither encourage nor discourage political engagement, they moderate the mobilizing influence from neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist online groups. Dissimilar significant ties, in turn, do not directly affect political engagement and do not interact with online participation. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.*

doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2009.01436.x

Scholars have hoped that by providing easy access to information and by offering a sphere for communication, the Internet will enhance political interest, pull citizens into the democratic process, and encourage civil society (Castells, 1996). However, political involvement may not always result in positive social outcomes. Is empowerment of white supremacists desired? Does mobilization of citizen militias contribute to democracy? There exist online groups in which radicals converge (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999). There also exist alarming scenarios according to which politically extreme online communities mobilize participants to socially detrimental actions (Sunstein, 2001).

These scenarios are persuasive but incomplete. First, little systematic evidence exists to support them. Although studies show links between Internet use and political engagement, less is known about the mobilizing influence exerted by existing online groups, especially by radical online communities. Some scholars thus argue that the

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cases in which mobilization can be problematic are yet to be addressed (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001) and that “absent in the literature is the empirical analysis of the negative consequences of new ICTs” (Garrett, 2007, p. 218). Second, these scenarios rarely account for the offline environment. Although scholars recognize the connection between online and offline milieus, few studies address joint effects these milieus exert on participation (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). Third, although research shows that social contacts impact individual political behavior, not many studies analyze whether friends and family play a different role than more distant associates.

Drawing on unique survey data obtained from participants in neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist online forums, this study addresses these issues. First, it assesses the links between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and members’ engagement in actions that support a given movement, such as volunteering and fundraising, and actions that publicly promote the movement, such as rallying or petitioning. Second, this study examines whether politically dissimilar social contacts *offline* encourage or thwart political engagement and whether they moderate the mobilizing influence exerted by online communities. Are neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists embedded in dissimilar social milieus more or less affected by online groups? Finally, this analysis distinguishes between friends and family (“*core ties*”) and more distant interpersonal associates (“*significant ties*”) to assess whether these two social formations differently influence political engagement.

Before introducing the methodology, this article reviews research on online groups and social movements, according to which radical and ideologically homogeneous online communities are likely to mobilize members to action. The subsequent section presents studies on social networks and political participation. It outlines why dissimilar ties should impact participation and moderate the influence exerted by online groups and why this impact may be different for core and significant ties.

### Online groups and mobilization to action

It is widely known that people select discussion partners based on similarities (Mutz, 2006). It is also a platitude to say that the Internet facilitates contact with groups that transcend geographical confines (Sunstein, 2001). Thus, homogeneous online communities naturally emerge. In fact, political chat rooms and message boards are more unanimous than other online groups, in which sociopolitical topics come up (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009) and whereas some political groups focus on presidential candidates others attract radical ideologues. The number of online hate sites increased by more than 60%, and there was also “a marked upswing in the use of ‘chat rooms’ for communications among extremists” in 1999 alone (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999, p. 1). May participation in such online groups mobilize members to action? The answer to this question seems to be affirmative.

Merely seeking information online is associated with knowledge, self-efficacy, and civic and political engagement (Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001).

Discussing politics online should produce yet stronger associations because political talk per se stimulates reflective thinking and political participation (Eliasoph, 1998; McLeod et al., 1999; Pan, Shen, Paek, & Sun, 2006). Indeed, civic messaging is linked to engagement (Shah et al., 2005) and also amplifies the effects that hard news use has on participation (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005). Longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies additionally establish that Internet use (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003) and discussing politics in structured online groups increase community involvement (Price & Cappella, 2002).

Activist online groups and especially radical and ideologically homogenous communities should be more effective in mobilizing members because they influence the affective and cognitive factors that are central to collective action (see Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Gamson, 1992). First, like-minded online groups may strengthen collective identity. According to the social identity and deindividuation model, this occurs because online anonymity and reduced social cues decrease perceived differences among members, foster identification with a group, and reinforce group's unity (Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001). Through these processes, activist online groups create solidarity, which contributes to implementing collective actions (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Hwang, Schmierbach, Paek, de Zuniga, & Shah, 2006).

Second, reinforcing online discussions may boost participants' self-efficacy by exacerbating their views (Wojcieszak, in press), encouraging them to express those views (McKenna & Bargh, 1998) and motivating them to stand up against an out-group (Spears et al., 2002). Activist online groups may be particularly likely to increase participants' confidence that a planned action will be effective because members overestimate public support for their views (Wojcieszak, 2008) and anticipate that others will join collective action (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002). Last but not least, activist online groups constitute extensive and easily accessible networks that are central to collective action (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; McAdam, 1986). Through listservs or forums, they recruit new members, organize supporters, distribute information about possibilities for engagement, and allow dispersed individuals to effectively plan protests (Gurak & Logie, 2003). Thus far, this research suggests that increased participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online discussion groups will be associated with greater political engagement, controlling for pertinent factors (*Hypothesis 1*).

### **Social environment offline**

Online and offline environments do not function in isolation and participants in online groups also belong to social networks offline. Sociologists, political scientists, and communication scholars have long recognized that it is necessary to study interpersonal ties to understand external influences on individual political behaviors (Durkheim, 1893; Tonnies, 1887). Recently, researchers have also shown that political similarity or dissimilarity within a social network is particularly important in

explaining political engagement (Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004; Mutz, 2006), in that “viable subjects for explanation are not individual attitudes, but degrees of attitude agreement among individuals in given structural situations” (Erickson, 1997, p. 99). Furthermore, scholars have noted that social networks encompass intimate friends and relatives (called here *core ties*) as well as more distant neighbors or coworkers (referred to as *significant ties*) (Boase, Wellman, Horrigan, & Rainie, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Despite qualitative differences between core ties and significant ties, research has generally not assessed whether these two social formations differently affect political participation. These issues are now addressed.

### Politically Dissimilar Core Ties

Close friends and family members constitute core ties, with whom people have frequent, intimate, and mutually supportive interactions (Boase et al., 2006; Granovetter, 1973). These ties are central to political socialization because “[s]ocial influence is exerted on the individual primarily thorough his intimate associates” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954, p. 301). As a result, individual political values, party attachments, and participatory behaviors are formed primarily within closely knit groups (Liebes & Ribak, 1992; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000).

What role do dissimilar core ties play in political engagement? They are likely to decrease it because—through normative influence—friends and family shape attitudes and behavior (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kelman, 1961). Due to affective bonds closely knit groups are “more effective in transmitting norms than weakly integrated groups, where deviant opinions are more likely to go unsanctioned or sanctions are less likely to be effective” (Finifter, 1974, p. 607). Desiring rewards, such as approval, or fearing punishments, such as social isolation, may encourage people to withdraw from political activities that are not supported by their core ties.

Also, people tend to avoid conflict and maintain congenial relationships. Because politics is contentious, it “has the potential interpersonal consequences which may foster political inactivity” (Rosenberg, 1954, p. 354). These consequences are especially salient in closely knit groups where harmonious interactions are a priority, and thus people may steer away from actions that are not approved by friends and family. Dissimilar core ties, moreover, might instill ambivalence. Because closely knit groups serve as standards for comparison and give a basis for evaluating individual ideas (Kelley, 1952), people may be strongly influenced by the views expressed by friends and family. When these views are dissonant, people may start questioning their own positions and become less likely to take political action as a result (Mutz, 2002).

Social contacts not only impact opinions directly and mediate political information, but also moderate the influences conveyed by media or—in this particular case—by online groups. Some studies find that media effects on attitudes and behaviors are contingent on interpersonal political talk (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele, 2002) and especially on the extent to which such talk exposes people to dissimilar perspectives (Feldman & Price, 2008).

How would dissimilar core ties moderate the mobilizing influence from online groups? When a person shares information from the media or—as is the case here—from online groups with a *like-minded* discussant, mediated and interpersonal sources reinforce each other and their effects are amplified. In contrast, talking with *dissimilar* discussants might provide a counterforce that attenuates the impact that the media or online groups otherwise have. Specifically, dissimilar core ties may make a given issue ambiguous or problematic as the mediated information “is overwhelmed by new, contradictory, or biased information gleaned during interpersonal discussions about politics” (Feldman & Price, 2008, p. 67). This may ultimately result in “communication confusion” and discourage a person from addressing the issue (Lenart, 1994). Also, because core ties exert normative influence and are central to validating one’s opinions, a person might devalue or reevaluate a news story or an Internet posting that is inconsonant with the views held by friends and family (Steiner, 1966). Together this research suggests that politically dissimilar friends and family will decrease political engagement among participants in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups (*Hypothesis 2*) and will also attenuate the association between participation in such groups and political engagement (*Hypothesis 3*).

### **Politically Dissimilar Significant Ties**

Significant ties encompass neighbors, coworkers, fellow members in organizations, and other more distant associates with whom people “to a lesser extent discuss important matters (or) are in less frequent contact” (Boase et al., 2006, p. 4). Although not as close as core ties, significant ties also impact political participation (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Their influence is likely to be informational, because ties that are outside closely knit circles disseminate novel ideas and offer opportunities for participatory activities (Granovetter, 1973; McLeod et al., 1999; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Some studies show that structural heterogeneity, understood as racially, politically and religiously diverse counties, promotes discussion network heterogeneity, and in turn, political participation (Scheufele et al., 2006), and also that work, church, and volunteer group contexts, which entail interactions among significant ties, enhance participation directly and through increased knowledge, news media use, and heterogeneous discussion networks (Scheufele et al., 2004, 2006). Other research finds that cross-cutting networks, defined as those that expose people to politically oppositional views (Mutz, 2002, 2006) or communities that exert structural cross-pressures, understood as those that entail conflict among political and socio-demographic factors that simultaneously pull a voter toward the Republicans and the Democrats (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), are related to late voting decisions, unstable vote intentions and decreased involvement. Yet other studies find that ambivalent networks, which provide two conflicting views, do not predict voting and vote decision timing (Nir, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Because the literature does not offer clear predictions, it is sensible to advance the following research question: What role do politically dissimilar significant offline ties play in political engagement and in moderating the

association between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and political engagement?

## Method

Data for this study come from an online survey conducted in summer 2005 of participants in neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist online discussion forums. The forums were identified by online search and subsequent web-graph analysis using the Issue Crawler Software. Web-graph analysis yielded central forums within each ideology, pointed to others that were not found in the basic search, and assured that the sampling frame on the forum level is exhaustive with 10 neo-Nazi and 9 environmentalist forums. Participants' e-mail addresses and private messages (PMs) were compiled by first selecting every second thread dating back to June 1, 2004 and then selecting every second topic given a random start. Every second e-mail address or PM was then collected from those topics to create a list of active participants, from which duplicate e-mails or PMs were removed. When member directories were available, participants' nationality was checked to exclude non-North Americans, to whom some questions would not be relevant.

A link to the online survey was sent to 517 sampled e-mail addresses and PMs, and a week later follow-up e-mails and PMs were resent. Of these, 210 resulted in fully completed interviews included in this analysis (neo-Nazi  $n = 114$ , environmentalists  $n = 96$ ). An additional 113 resulted in partial completes. The final 194 were categorized as unknown eligibility, that is no response was received or the e-mail was returned. The response rate is 41%, using AAPOR RR1. The sample was younger ( $M = 35$ ,  $SD = 13$ ) and more racially homogeneous (94% white) than the general population. Respondents were also better educated ( $M = 16$  years), mostly male (67%), and with median income between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Statistics for all the analyzed variables broken up by environmentalists and neo-Nazis are presented in Appendix.

### *Political engagement*

Respondents were asked whether, in the last 12 months, they took part in nine political activities, and value 1 was assigned for each activity in which a respondent reported engaging. Two outcome measures were created: *Movement Support* averaged fundraising, volunteering, and organizational membership ( $\alpha = .60$ ,  $M = .47$ ,  $SD = .35$ ), and *Movement Promotion* averaged contacting public officials, contacting news media, attending meetings or rallies, participating in a protest, petitioning, and trying to persuade others ( $\alpha = .69$ ,  $M = .54$ ,  $SD = .30$ ). There were three reasons for creating these two measures. First, the nine items loaded on two factors and principal component analysis pointed to these two underlying constructs. Distinguishing between supporting and promoting a given cause is also crucial when neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists are concerned. Whereas traditional actions carried out by radical ideologues may not influence the political system, acts that disseminate radical ideas might attract additional adherents and affect public opinion (Noelle-Neumann,



1993). Furthermore, these measures map onto extant distinctions between public and private acts, which may or may not involve public expression and confrontation with opposing groups (Andolina, Keeter, Zukin, & Jenkins, 2003; Scheufele & Eveland, 2001; Ulbig & Funk, 1999; Verba & Nie, 1972).

#### *Level of participation in online groups*

Using participation in online groups as the main predictor requires addressing such issues as the frequency and the amount of time spent online. These were assessed by two questions: “During the past week, how many times did you enter this forum and other forums that address political issues from a similar point of view?” (from 1 “Never” to 5 “More than 7 times”) and “how much time did you spend participating in this forum and in other forums that discuss political issues from a similar point of view?” (1 “Up to 30 minutes,” 6 “5 hours or more”). To create a complete measure, an additional question asked: “When did you first start participating in this forum and in other forums that discuss political issues from a similar point of view?” (from 1 “Less than 3 months ago” to 5 “More than 2 years ago”). The final measure averaged the responses (one factor,  $\alpha = .78$ ,  $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ; range 1.00–5.33, higher values indicate greater participation).

#### *Perceived political dissimilarity of offline ties*

Political dissimilarity, the central moderator, was assessed separately for offline *Core Ties* and *Significant Ties* (Boase et al., 2006). Respondents were asked to “think about those people you feel VERY close to, such as your family and close friends,” and questions probed about perceptual dissimilarity (“How many of them do you think generally have opinions on political issues that are DIFFERENT from yours?” from 1 “Almost none” to 5 “Almost all of them”), exposure to dissimilar opinions (“... how often do they express views on political issues that are DIFFERENT from yours?” 1 “Almost never,” 5 “Almost always”), and political disagreement (“... how often do you DISAGREE with them when you talk about politics?” 1 “Almost never,” 5 “Almost always”). The final *Perceived Dissimilarity of Core Ties* measure averaged these items (one factor,  $\alpha = .74$ ,  $M = 2.9$ ,  $SD = .91$ , 1–5, higher values indicate greater dissimilarity).

After priming respondents to “think about the people you feel SOMEWHAT CLOSE to. They’re more than just casual acquaintances, but they’re not as close as the friends and relatives you already identified above,” parallel questions probed about perceptual dissimilarity, exposure to dissimilar opinions, and political disagreement. *Perceived Dissimilarity of Significant Ties* was created by averaging these items (one factor,  $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = .91$ , range 1–5). These two measures reflect the extent to which people think that their offline ties expose them to views unlike their own (Mutz, 2002) and account for perception, exposure, and disagreement.

#### *Controls*

It is plausible that there is no relationship between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and action taking. Opinion extremism,



news media use, and political discussion emerge as likely confounders. Those who hold strong views, heavily rely on news media, and frequently talk about politics with interpersonal associates are more likely to join online groups *and also* be more politically engaged (McLeod et al., 1999; Price & Cappella, 2002; Verba et al., 1995). To address the potential spuriousness, all multivariate models included these stringent controls in addition to such demographic characteristics as age, gender, or education.

#### *Ideological extremism*

Respondents indicated, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“*Strongly disagree*”) to 7 (“*Strongly agree*”), their agreement with 10 ideology-specific statements. Examples include “Violence against nonwhite people is a natural ritual passage into true manhood” or “All nonwhite people who are now in the U.S. should be deported and not allowed back into the country,” (neo-Nazi questionnaire) or “Sometimes it is worth sacrificing human lives so that nature survives” or “Arson, vandalism, theft and other destructive attacks against businesses are acceptable when done to promote environmental or animal-rights causes” (environmentalist questionnaire). The final measure averaged the responses (one factor,  $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 5.0$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ , range 1–7 with 7 being the most extreme).

#### *News media exposure*

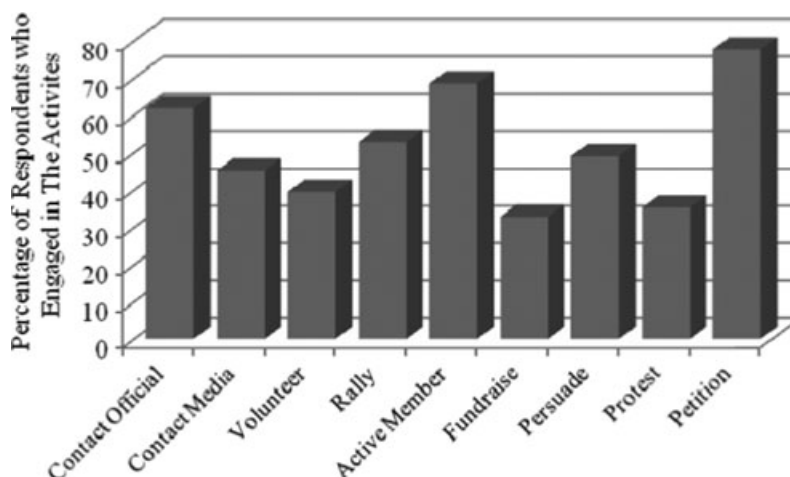
Respondents were asked to indicate the number of days in the past week they watched national network news, cable news, local TV news (10 stations and programs were listed), read a daily newspaper (six titles listed), and listened to NPR and to political talk radio shows (seven programs listed). Respondents were also asked to select which news or current events magazines they read (six listed and an open-ended “other”). The final measure summed the answers ( $M = 12$ ,  $SD = 13$ , range 1–54).

#### *Frequency of political discussion*

The questionnaire also probed about the frequency with which respondents discuss politics with core ties and with significant ties. Respondents were asked “how often would you say you discuss politics” with “people you feel VERY close to, such as your family and close friends” ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) and with “people you feel SOMEWHAT CLOSE to” ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ , from 1 “*Almost never*” to 5 “*Almost always*”). Accounting for political talk addresses the potential spuriousness between online participation and political engagement and also assesses political dissimilarity separately from discussion frequency.

#### *Ideology*

Some differences between the two analyzed samples, neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists, could affect the tested relationships. The multivariate models thus included a dichotomous variable representing the ideological group from which a respondent was recruited, with 1 indicating neo-Nazis and 0 representing environmentalists ( $M = .54$ ,  $SD = .46$ ).



**Figure 1** Figure displays the percentage of respondents who reported engaging in each of the following activities in the past year.

## Results

This study assessed the association between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and members' political engagement as contingent on perceived dissimilarity of offline social ties. Before scrutinizing the factors that encourage or inhibit political engagement among the analyzed ideologues, it is of interest to assess the extent to which they take part in the political process. Figure 1 shows that respondents far surpass the general population with regard to their involvement and paradoxically represent the kind of citizens who are touted by political theorists. Most neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists have signed or circulated a petition, contacted an official and belong to organizations. About a half have also rallied, tried to persuade others, or contacted news media.

Do interactions with radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups explain these high participation levels, also controlling for extremism, discussion frequency, and news media use (H1)? To test the hypothesis, two hierarchical regression models predicted engagement in *Movement Support* and *Movement Promotion*. In the first block, both models entered sociodemographics, ideology (neo-Nazi vs. environmentalist), extremism, and news media exposure. These were followed by online participation to assess whether adding this central predictor improved the models.

Table 1 presents estimates for both models. Volunteering, fundraising, and organizational membership (*Movement Support*) are positively predicted by education, whereas engagement in such actions as rallying, protesting, or contacting media (*Movement Promotion*) is associated with age, extremism, and ideology. That is, older and more extreme respondents as well as environmentalists participate in more activities that promote their agenda. Above and beyond these controls, entering participation in online groups significantly contributes to the variance explained. In

**Table 1** Regressions Predicting Political Engagement

	Movement Support	Movement Promotion
Age	.00 (.00)	.00** (.00)
Education	.02* (.01)	.01 (.01)
Gender (male)	-.08 (.06)	.02 (.05)
Income	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Ideology (neo-Nazis)	-.09 (.06)	-.11* (.05)
News Media Exposure	.00 (.00)	.00** (.00)
Ideological Extremism	.01 (.02)	.05** (.02)
First block $R^2$ (%)	10.0***	19.1***
Participation in Online Group	.05** (.02)	.04** (.02)
Incremental $R^2$ (%)	4.0**	3.4**
Final $R^2$ (%)	14.0***	22.5***

Note: \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ . Entries are before-entry unstandardized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Incremental  $R^2$  illustrate the changes after entering *Participation in Online Group*.

fact, online participation is the strongest predictor of engaging in actions that support neo-Nazi and environmental movements as well as in those that promote the radical agenda. The most noteworthy difference between the two models concerns extremism, which is not associated with *Movement Support*, a finding that may underscore the mobilizing influence exerted by radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups. Whereas extremism and online interactions equally encourage participants to publicly promote their movement, it is online interactions *only* that motivate them to support their movement by volunteering or fundraising.

Do dissimilar friends and family decrease political engagement (H2) and do they also mitigate the mobilizing influence exerted by radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups (H3)? In order to test these main and interactive effects perceived dissimilarity measures were trichotomized into low, medium, and high. This was done for methodological and theoretical reasons. First, the relationship between offline dissimilarity and the outcome variables was cubic. Including linear, squared, and cubic main effects variables as well as three interaction terms for core ties and three interaction terms for significant ties would pose interpretative challenges and overcontrol for online participation. Second, scholars have suggested that what may matter to political participation is whether an individual is in majority or in minority (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1988) and have noted that the link between political dissimilarity and participation may be nonlinear (McClurg, 2006; Nir, 2008). Categorizing the measures addressed this literature and allowed testing whether an oppositional network (high dissimilarity) has different effects than a like-minded network (low dissimilarity) and than a network in which some ties are similar and others are dissimilar (medium dissimilarity).

Two hierarchical regression models were constructed to test the influence exerted by core ties. Both models included the variables that entered the models just described, as well as political discussion with core ties and two measures

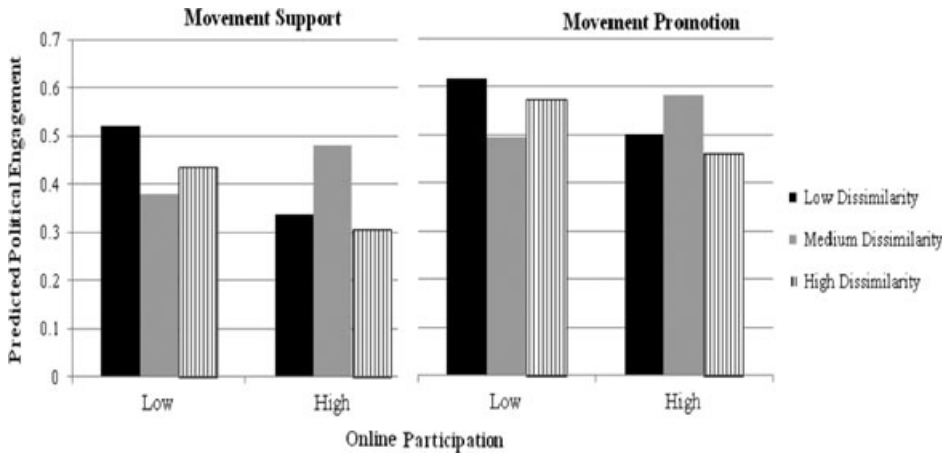
representing their low and high dissimilarity (with the medium as a reference category). In the second block, these main effects variables were followed by two interaction terms (*OnlineParticipation*  $\times$  *LowDissimilarity* and *OnlineParticipation*  $\times$  *HighDissimilarity*) formed from centered variables in order to avoid multicollinearity between the interaction terms and their components (Aiken & West, 1991).

Table 2 shows estimates for both models. Taking part in actions that support neo-Nazi and environmental movements as well as in actions that promote these movements is primarily predicted by participation in online groups and by political talk with core ties. In addition, gender, education, and ideology are also related to movement support, whereas age, extremism, ideology, and news media use predict movement promotion. The categorical measures representing low and high dissimilarity do not exert significant main effects, but the negative coefficients suggest that similar as well as dissimilar friends and family may attenuate political engagement. Overall, these demographic, attitudinal, and communicative measures explain roughly one fifth to one third of variance in political engagement. Although the additional contribution made by the interaction terms is not substantial, all coefficients are significant or approach significance. Their signs indicate that the relationship between participation in online groups and political engagement is *weaker* for those ideologues whose friends and family are like minded *and also* for those whose friends and family hold opposing views. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 2, which plots the predicted means based on all variables in the model.

**Table 2** Regressions Predicting Political Engagement

	Movement Support	Movement Promotion
Age	.00 (.00)	.01** (.00)
Education	.01 <sup>†</sup> (.01)	.00 (.01)
Gender (male)	-.10 <sup>†</sup> (.06)	-.01 (.05)
Income	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Ideology (neo-Nazis)	-.09 <sup>†</sup> (.05)	-.11* (.04)
News Media Exposure	.00 (.00)	.00* (.00)
Participation in Online Group	.04* (.02)	.03* (.01)
Ideological Extremism	.00 (.02)	.05** (.01)
Political Discussion With Core Ties	.06* (.03)	.08*** (.02)
Low Dissimilarity of Core Ties	-.04 (.07)	-.01 (.06)
High Dissimilarity of Core Ties	-.09 (.07)	-.04 (.06)
First Block $R^2$ (%)	17.5***	28.5***
Low Dissimilarity of Core Ties $\times$ Participation in Online Group	-.12* (.05)	-.08 <sup>†</sup> (.04)
High Dissimilarity of Core Ties $\times$ Participation in Online Group	-.09 <sup>†</sup> (.05)	-.07 <sup>†</sup> (.04)
Incremental $R^2$ (%)	2.1 <sup>†</sup>	1.5
Final $R^2$ (%)	19.6***	30.0***

*Note:* \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , <sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ . Entries are before-entry unstandardized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Incremental  $R^2$  illustrate the changes after entering the interaction terms.



**Figure 2** Predicted political engagement by participation in online groups and dissimilarity of core ties. Higher values indicate greater engagement. Predicted values based on all the variables in the model are plotted. Low and high online participation measures were created by respectively, subtracting and adding 1 standard deviation to the mean.

What role do dissimilar significant ties play (RQ)? To test whether they decrease political engagement and interact with participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups, two parallel regression models were constructed. The models predicted *Movement Support* and *Movement Promotion* from demographics, ideology, extremism, news media exposure, political discussion with significant ties, online participation, and low and high perceived political dissimilarity of significant ties. These main effects variables were followed by the corresponding interaction terms (*Online Participation*  $\times$  *Low Dissimilarity* and *Online Participation*  $\times$  *High Dissimilarity*) formed from centered main components variables.

Table 3 shows that the coefficients for the pertinent controls are similar to those in the models already presented. Frequent political discussion with significant ties and also participation in online groups strongly predict volunteering, fundraising, and organizational membership (*Movement Support*). Engaging in such activities as rallying or petitioning (*Movement Promotion*) is also associated with political talk and online participation as well as extremism, ideology, and media use. Insignificant main effects coefficients for the two categorical variables and insignificant interaction terms indicate that more distant interpersonal associates, whether like-minded or dissimilar, do not affect political engagement among the analyzed neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists and do not moderate the relationship between online participation and action taking.

## Discussion

Extensive evidence has accumulated on the contributions that Internet use makes to political engagement, but fewer studies have evaluated the role played by existing

**Table 3** Regressions Predicting Political Engagement

	Movement Support	Movement Promotion
Age	.00 (.00)	.00* (.00)
Education	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Gender (male)	-.08 (.05)	-.02 (.05)
Income	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Ideology (neo-Nazis)	-.10 <sup>†</sup> (.05)	-.13** (.05)
News Media Exposure	.00 (.00)	.00* (.00)
Participation in Online Group	.05** (.02)	.04** (.02)
Ideological Extremism	.00 (.02)	.04** (.02)
Political Discussion with Significant Ties	.05* (.02)	.07*** (.02)
Low Dissimilarity of Significant Ties	.03 (.06)	.03 (.05)
High Dissimilarity of Significant Ties	-.05 (.06)	.01 (.05)
First Block $R^2$ (%)	17.0***	28.7***
Low Dissimilarity of Significant Ties × Participation in Online Group	-.05 (.05)	.00 (.04)
High Dissimilarity of Significant Ties × Participation in Online Group	-.00 (.05)	.02 (.04)
Incremental $R^2$ (%)	1.0	0.2
Final $R^2$ (%)	18.0***	28.9***

Note: \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , <sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ . Entries are before-entry unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Incremental  $R^2$  illustrate the changes after entering the interaction terms.

online discussion groups. In addition, although scholars have alarmed that radical groups proliferate online, research on the new media has mostly focused on activist groups seen as beneficial to society. Scholars have also acknowledged that online and offline milieus are interconnected, but studies have generally not assessed their *joint* impact on political behavior. Moreover, although friends and family have been seen as qualitatively distinct from more distant interpersonal associates, studies have not accounted for their potentially different influences on individual political engagement.

This study attempted to address these issues. It first tested the association between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and engaging in actions that support a given movement and in actions that publicly promote the movement's agenda. This study also assessed whether politically dissimilar social environment offline influences the links between online groups and political engagement. Finally, in analyzing these relationships, this study distinguished between such core ties as friends and family and such significant ties as neighbors or coworkers.

Overall, the findings present a clear picture: Engaging in various political activities increases with increased participation in neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist online discussion groups. Importantly, this relationship persists when controlling for such theoretically crucial confounders as ideological extremism, political discussion, and news media exposure. This relationship is especially pronounced with regard to actions aimed at supporting a given movement. Although such actions are generally

seen as nonconfrontational, they might become socially problematic when the fundraising is done to aid white supremacy or when a voluntary organization carries out disruptive actions. With regard to more confrontational activities, participation in online groups is as central as extremism or political talk with interpersonal ties.

What role does the offline environment play? Frequent political discussion and news media exposure, long recognized as central to political participation among more conventional citizens, also serve as mobilizing factors among the analyzed ideologues. Notably political talk and especially news media use are primarily associated with activities that publicly promote neo-Nazi and environmental agendas, such as rallying, petitioning, or contacting public officials. These strong associations underscore the contributions made by discussion networks to collective action. They also suggest that news media may provide information about possibilities for engagement, publicize issues that need to be addressed and/or frame problems in a way that seems unjust to radical ideologues and thus instigates their political action (Hwang et al., 2006).

Contrary to the predictions, dissimilar friends and family neither encourage nor discourage political engagement. Consistent with the interaction hypothesis, they moderate the mobilizing influence from neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist online groups. Specifically, the positive link between online participation and political engagement is weaker for those ideologues whose core ties are like-minded *and also* for those whose core ties are oppositional, relative to those ideologues who are embedded in heterogeneous closely knit groups. This holds for actions that support neo-Nazi and environmental movements as well as for those actions that publicly promote these movements. Opinions held by more distant interpersonal associates do not directly matter and do not interact with participation in online groups.

There are several explanations for these results. Apart from the weaknesses inherent in self-reports, the fact that offline dissimilarity is not directly linked to political engagement might indicate that some people resist opposing views. Studies on biased processing find that individuals who are firmly committed to their position interpret, evaluate, and recall arguments in ways that reinforce their biases (Kunda, 1990). Similarly, public opinion research shows that although oppositional opinion climate discourages people from expressing their views or from being politically active, it does not affect people with strong predilections, the so-called "hard cores" in the spiral of silence theory (Kaplowitz, Fink, D'Alessio, & Armstrong, 1983; Krassa, 1988; Lasorsa, 1991; Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Because the analyzed neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists hold extreme opinions, are deeply invested in a given cause, and can be classified as "hard cores," their political engagement may not be directly influenced by dissimilar social networks.

The finding that friends and family attenuate the influence exerted by radical and ideologically homogenous online groups supports the differential gains model that sees interpersonal talk as moderating the effects of the information environment. The different role played by core and significant ties is consistent with the outlined studies on social influence and reference groups, according to which norms conveyed through friends and family more successfully shape individual reaction to online



groups than information conveyed through more distant associates (see Hyman & Singer, 1968). These two findings extend the differential gains model in two important ways. Whereas the model has generally focused on the news media, interpersonal discussion appears to also moderate the effects that online groups have on political behaviors and attitudes.<sup>3</sup> Also, distinguishing between core and significant ties may more completely portray the factors that produce the differential gains from information sources. Future studies that account for computer-mediated communication and also differentiate between friends, family, and distant associates are needed to determine whether the results from this study emerge in other contexts.

Why would like-minded friends and family also decrease the association between online participation and political engagement? Free riding theory (Jordan & Maloney, 2006; Olson, 1965, 1971) and the threshold models of collective behavior (Granovetter, 1978) offer some explanations. Talking politics with similar ideologues online and with like-minded core ties offline exposes a person to messages that jointly advocate a certain issue. This creates an impression that many people in various contexts support a given cause, a sense that there is no need to promote it further, and/or a placid comfort that others will address it. Consistent with this notion, research finds that people who see local opinion climate as agreeable discuss politics less frequently, perhaps because they think that their own views are already prevalent and do not need to be promoted (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 1998).

Another notable finding regards those neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists whose social milieu encompasses some similar and some dissimilar ties. Such a heterogeneous network not only promotes political engagement to a greater extent than a one-sidedly reinforcing or a fully oppositional one, but also appears to amplify the mobilizing influence from radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups. This finding fits with the free-riding theory and the threshold models. Encountering supporters *and* opponents, the analyzed ideologues may see that stakes are high and that their action might make a difference (Mutz, 1995; Scheufele & Eveland, 2001). It is also possible that the analyzed neo-Nazis and environmentalists simply disregard challenging information and pay more attention to reinforcing views that encourage their engagement.

Finally, the results suggest that neo-Nazis are less likely than environmentalists to engage in various actions. Follow-up analyses also find that for this group online participation does not predict political engagement.<sup>4</sup> This might be due to different aims sought by the two movements. Whereas neo-Nazis attempt to change the social structure altogether, environmentalists attempt to implement specific agendas. As a result, neo-Nazis may have fewer opportunities for participation and their online forums could act as a safe haven for venting and sharing resentments. In contrast, environmentalists engage in actions that aim to influence policy-making and their online groups would serve a mobilizing role. Analyses comparing postings to neo-Nazi and environmental forums are needed to buttress this explanation.

In drawing conclusions from these results, one should be appropriately cautious. Most importantly, this study suffers from three perennial problems inherent in survey

research on political talk: causality, self-selection, and validity of behavioral outcomes. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to make a strong inference about causal direction. This issue is both conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, the link between political talk and political participation is not unidirectional and discussing politics online is itself a political act. Those citizens who are already interested, knowledgeable, and active turn to the Internet for information and communication. This is especially true for political activists who may seek out yet another participatory venue and turn to online groups. Methodologically, detecting the link between online participation and political engagement does not indicate that one preceded the other. Relying on multivariate models with stringent controls and establishing that such crucial factors as extremism, political talk, and news media use do not confound the association strengthens the confidence in the presented findings. At the same time, it addresses spuriousness without speaking to causality, which cannot be determined without data on prior and subsequent engagement.

In a similar vein, this study does not speak to behavioral outcomes and cannot establish whether the surveyed neo-Nazis and radical environmentalists followed up their online discussions with rallying or petitioning. Many—if not most—Internet users may go online simply to vent or express opinions. Feeling empowered by self-expression or seeing it as a sufficient way to address an issue, those users may not engage in any subsequent actions. There are some theoretical reasons to suppose that online discussions among activists mobilize members (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002) and case studies show that activist online groups induce offline actions (see van de Donk et al., 2004). At the same time, these case studies focus on highly self-selected individuals; hence, it is unclear whether similar mobilization would be generated by nonactivist online groups and among people who are not already devoted to a given cause. Given the issue's importance, experimental and longitudinal studies are needed to disentangle causal direction and to establish whether participation in online groups indeed incites political engagement. Content analyses should also test the extent to which postings to political online forums call for concrete actions. Such triangulated evidence would complement the presented findings and—depending on what online groups are analyzed—would provide further insight into cases in which activism might be problematic.

Another limitation is due to the reliance on self-reports of political dissimilarity of offline social ties. Because perceived dissimilarity may not reliably indicate factual differences, conclusions regarding the role played by friends, family, and more distant ties need to be interpreted cautiously. It would be ideal to validate respondents' reports with follow-up data on the views held by their offline ties, and also to test how exactly those ties moderate the link between online participation and political mobilization. Furthermore, because this study relied on unconventional respondents any generalizations to more mainstream online communities or to more conventional citizens are problematic. Finally, the findings on participants in discussion forums might not apply to people who utilize chat rooms or other computer-mediated-communication. In order to account for potential differences,

attempts were made to recruit visitors to neo-Nazi and environmentalist Yahoo! and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) chats. Because those online spaces are less populated, the number of respondents was insufficient to conduct analyses.<sup>5</sup>

Although this study cannot provide a conclusive answer as to whether radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups increase engagement in real-world actions, it can offer insights into underanalyzed communities, describe the links between online participation and political engagement, and test the role played by the offline social environment. This study also offers findings that provide directions for more in-depth analyses and that have theoretical and practical implications. First, this analysis shows that although face-to-face groups have been traditionally seen as central to political socialization, online groups have emerged as an additional factor that influences political engagement. For some radical ideologues, moreover, taking part in online groups is more strongly related to mobilization than extremism or socioeconomic characteristics.

Setting aside the unconventional sample, this study also suggests that the linkages between political dissimilarity and individual behavior are more complex than has been generally acknowledged. Moderately dissimilar social networks, in which some interpersonal associates support individual position, whereas some others oppose it, appear to be most conducive to participation. Overly supportive and unanimously oppositional networks seem to decrease political engagement. Also, this study suggests that research on social influences on political attitudes or behaviors should differentiate between core ties and significant ties. It may be that insufficient attention to nonlinear relationships and insufficient distinctions between friends and family on one hand and neighbors and coworkers on the other hand have led to some inconsistencies in the debate on political dissimilarity and political participation.

Finally, this analysis suggests that the contributions that the Internet makes to society should be evaluated based on the agenda promoted by individuals who are becoming mobilized. When online communities favor racial violence or civil unrest, their mobilizing effects might be socially problematic. Interactions with such online groups influence extremism, self-expression, and public opinion perception, and also incite petitioning, rallying, and protesting. Although radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups are not likely to turn entertainment junkies into vehement activists, they may induce active individuals to engage in additional causes. Ultimately, participation in such communities might increase the visibility of extreme groups, assure members' representation in the political process, and ultimately reshape the political agenda.

## Acknowledgments

The author thanks Dr. Michael Delli Carpini and Dr. Michael Hennessy from the Annenberg School for Communication, Lilach Nir, as well as the anonymous reviewers and the editor.

## Notes

- 1 The differentiation between core and significant ties, popularized by Boase and others (2006) in their Pew Internet and American Life Project Study, follows the classical distinction between strong and weak ties introduced by Granovetter (1973). Here, the terminology proposed by Boase and others (2006) is used because the questions about offline ties were adapted from their study and also because these questions were limited in their ability to reliably measure tie strength as defined by Granovetter.
- 2 Although these studies have not analyzed significant ties per se, research that uses county or social context measures likely taps the influence exerted by more distant social associates (Scheufele et al., 2004, 2006). Research on network heterogeneity or ambivalence may be less informative in this context, as it generally aggregates measures on political disagreement with spouses or close friends with items on disagreement with coworkers or acquaintances (Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005).
- 3 Some studies on differential gains account for computer-mediated-communication (CMC; e.g., Hardy & Scheufele, 2006). Unlike here, these studies model CMC as a factor parallel to interpersonal communication and analyze whether it also moderates the impact from news media.
- 4 The analyses broken up by the ideology found that for neo-Nazis online participation did not predict political engagement and extremism predicted movement promotion. For environmentalists, movement support and movement promotion were predicted by online participation and the former also by extremism. The interactions between online participation and offline ties' dissimilarity were in predicted direction but—due to decreased statistical power—the coefficients did not reach statistical significance.
- 5 Visitors to such chat groups are not likely to substantially differ from those in discussion forums because there is a high degree of overlap, with neo-Nazis and environmentalists utilizing both forms of CMC. In the recruitment process, many individuals voiced that they had already been contacted through the other venue. Also the forums often contain postings inviting members to enter a specific IRC channel.

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## Appendix

**Table 1** Subsamples Characteristics

	Neo-Nazis	Environmentalists	Total	Test Statistics
Social demographics				
Gender				
Male	86%	44%	67%	$\chi^2_{(df=1)} = 42.81^{***}$
Age				
Year (interval)	33.14	37.92	35.30	$F_{(1, 211)} = 7.38^{**}$
Education				
HS graduation or less	22%	15%	19%	$\chi^2_{(df=3)} = 3.91$
Some college	36%	30%	33%	
College degree	23%	29%	26%	
Above college degree	19%	26%	22%	
Income				
Below \$15,000	11%	14%	12%	$\chi^2_{(df=5)} = 2.34$
\$15,000–\$30,000	16%	20%	18%	
\$30,000–\$50,000	25%	25%	25%	
\$50,000–\$75,000	19%	18%	18.5%	
\$75,000–\$100,000	11%	11%	11%	
Above \$100,000	19%	12%	16%	
Attitudinal characteristics				
Ideological Extremism	5.16	4.81	5.00	$F_{(1, 214)} = 4.29^*$
Behavioral characteristics				
Participation in Online Forum	3.55	3.46	3.51	$F_{(1, 314)} = .39$
Political Discussion with Core Ties	3.28	3.35	3.32	$F_{(1, 284)} = .30$

(Continued Overleaf)

**Table 1** (Continued)

	Neo-Nazis	Environmentalists	Total	Test Statistics
Political Discussion with Sig. Ties	3.02	2.84	2.94	$F_{(1, 225)} = 1.84$
Political Dissimilarity of Core Ties	2.86	3.02	2.94	$F_{(1, 284)} = 2.23$
Political Dissimilarity of Sig. Ties	2.92	3.04	2.97	$F_{(1, 245)} = 1.16$
News media use	12.68	13.56	13.06	$F_{(1, 315)} = .16$
Political engagement				
Movement Promotion	0.48	0.60	0.54	$F_{(1, 209)} = 8.29^{**}$
Contacting Officials	0.46	0.80	0.62	$F_{(1, 209)} = 28.26^{***}$
Contacting Media	0.35	0.57	0.45	$F_{(1, 209)} = 10.81^{**}$
Rallying	0.59	0.46	0.53	$F_{(1, 209)} = 3.53+$
Persuading	0.49	0.49	0.49	$F_{(1, 209)} = 0.00$
Protesting	0.29	0.43	0.35	$F_{(1, 209)} = 4.37^*$
Petitioning	0.71	0.85	0.78	$F_{(1, 209)} = 6.32^*$
Movement Support	0.40	0.55	0.47	$F_{(1, 209)} = 9.99^{**}$
Volunteering	0.31	0.50	0.39	$F_{(1, 209)} = 8.37^{**}$
Organizational	0.61	0.77	0.69	$F_{(1, 209)} = 6.06^*$
Membership				
Fundraising	0.28	0.38	0.33	$F_{(1, 209)} = 2.60$

Note:  $p < .10$ ,  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ ,  $***p < .001$ .