

# Generating Political Interest with Online News

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# GENERATING POLITICAL INTEREST

## Generating Political Interest with Online News

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### Abstract

This paper examines whether new media can address low levels of political engagement among youth. This paper reports the results of an experiment conducted in 2010 and 2011 where a random sample of participants were exposed to a variety of online news sources. The experiment is unique in recognizing the varied ways in which online news is accessed and acquired by users, including through social networks, and in assessing how different news stories affect political interest. Interest in local politics was higher for youth who were exposed to a variety of online news sources as opposed to those youth who were not exposed to these sources. In addition, use of online news increased political interest, controlling for prior levels of political interest. The results affirm the potential of online news sources to stimulate youth's interest and engagement in politics.

**Keywords:** Internet, news, political engagement, youth, political interest, experiment

### **Generating Political Interest with Online News**

There is great concern about youth's low levels of political engagement and what that could mean for the health of our democratic system (Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2005; Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). If the next generation is uninterested in public affairs, they will be unlikely to develop the knowledge and skills required to deal with collective problems, such as climate change. If an entire segment of the population is not participating in the political process, their interests may not be adequately addressed in government policy (Wattenberg, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Zukin et al., 2006).

In North America, the voter turnout rate is approximately 15 to 20 percentage points lower for youth than the general population (Barnes, 2010; Census Bureau, 2009; Elections Canada, 2012; File, 2013). In Canada, the decline in voter turnout is attributed to youth's declining turnout (Blais & Loewen, 2011; Blais, Gidengil, Nevitte & Nadeau, 2004). The last two federal elections marked new lows in voter turnout in Canada. In 2008 and 2011, approximately 60% of eligible voters cast their ballots whereas in the past, voter turnout varied between 70% and 80% (Elections Canada, nd). In the 2011 federal election, only 39% of 18 to 24 year olds voted, whereas 75% of those citizens aged 65 to 74 years voted (Elections Canada, 2012).

In the United States, voter turnout is still relatively low, but the situation has improved. The reason for this turnaround is unclear. Youth were the only group to significantly increase their voter turnout rate in the 2008 American presidential election, compared to the 2004 American presidential election (Census Bureau, 2009). The increase in youth turnout was short-lived as the turnout rate decreased in 2012 (File, 2013). In 2012, 41% of 18 to 24 year olds

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voted compared to 72% of those citizens aged 65 and older (File, 2013). In sum, in both countries, there is a sizable age gap in the voter turnout rate.

Young adults' low levels of engagement may be perceived as a threat to the continuing health of a democratic system. Studies demonstrate that youth's low voter turnout is not a life cycle effect, but a generational effect (Barnes, 2010; Howe, 2003; Milner, 2010; Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2008). As such, patterns of low turnout could continue in the future as politically active generations die out and are replaced with less engaged generations. In a sense, youth are the canaries in the mine (Hooghe, 2004), signaling future changes in patterns of political engagement. These changes may include a shift in forms of political engagement away from voting toward other types of activities (Cohen, Kahne, Bowyer, Middaugh, Rogowski, 2012; Dalton, 2008).

Why are youth less engaged in politics than older adults? Research points to low levels of political interest and knowledge, which highly correlate with voting and other political behavior (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Blais & Loewen, 2011; Howe, 2003, 2006; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 1997; Milner, 2010; Rubenson et al., 2004; Smets & Van Ham, 2013; Zukin et al., 2006). Political interest precedes political knowledge and thus, research should examine the role of political interest in affecting political knowledge as well as behavior (Stromback & Shehata, 2010).

Despite the importance of political interest, little research has examined political interest as a dependent variable and even less research has focused on political interest as an outcome of media use (Boulianne, 2011; Stromback & Shehata, 2010). As such, this research focuses on political interest with the assumption that political interest is an antecedent to political behavior

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and knowledge; political interest is more malleable, especially among young adults, than political behavior; and there is a lack of research on political interest as an outcome of media use. Political interest may be a necessary, but insufficient condition of political participation (Stromback & Shehata, 2010). In Canada, studies affirm youth's low levels of political interest and engagement, compared to adults (Blais & Loewen, 2011; Milner, 2010).

### **New Media and Youth**

Youth are important case studies in the effects of new media. Younger users have the highest usage of the Internet. In 2010-11, approximately 95% of young adults used the Internet (Statistics Canada, 2011; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Furthermore, these users have greater skills compared to their older counterparts (Hargittai, 2002). Computer and Internet training was a standard component of the school curriculum for this age group. This generation grew up with the Internet (Zukin et al., 2006). Because of this experience, young adults are interesting case studies in the effects of this technology (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). That said, there are real differences among youth in their levels of skills (Hargittai, 2010).

Youth are at a critical life stage where the effects of media may be increasingly important and influential as they form their generational and individual identities (Arnett, 1995; Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Neudorf, Smets & Garcia-Albacete, 2013; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006). Preliminary research suggests that the impact of the Internet on engagement may be different for different age groups (Iyengar & Jackman, 2004). For example, Shah and colleagues (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001a; Shah, McLeod, & Hoon, 2001b) find that the effects of informational uses of the Internet on engagement are strongest among younger users, compared

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to older adults. Canadian studies affirm the positive and significant effect of online news on engagement (Boulianne, 2007; Blais & Loewen, 2011) and political knowledge (Milner, 2010).

Another line of research demonstrates that online media are more likely to influence youth's voting and other political behavior, compared to other information sources (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 1997; Kidd & Phillips, 2007; Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006; Shah et al., 2001b; Towner, 2013). Newspaper readership, a well-established correlate of political engagement, is less common among youth (Keown, 2007; Milan, 1995; Pew Research Center, 2009). In this void, online news can have a substantial effect on youth's political engagement.

Most of the studies related to new media and engagement use cross-sectional designs, which are limited for assessing causality (Boulianne, 2009). While the findings show promise, the magnitude of the effect is modest at best (Boulianne, 2009; Boulianne, 2011). Changes in political behavior related to media use can be more difficult to ascertain, because these changes materialize over a longer time period than attitudinal change. Furthermore, a variety of factors may influence political engagement. In terms of voting, these factors include being asked to vote, being available on Election Day, and the competitiveness of the election (Rubenson et al., 2004; Verba et al., 1995; Wattenberg, 2008). As such, political interest is likely more malleable by the media, compared to political behavior. Finally, compared to youth, older cohorts are further along in the development of their political identity and thus, have more stable patterns of political interest (Prior, 2010). As such, exposure to online information may have less of an effect on adults' levels of interest, knowledge and engagement, compared to youth. As such, further research should focus on how new media affects political interest among youth.

### **Online News and Political Interest**

In 2000, Lupia and Philpot (2005) conducted a seminal experiment related to online news and political interest. They found that the effects of online news on political interest varied by website and by participants' evaluation of these websites (Lupia & Philpot, 2005). The study is exceptional in the pool of research on the effects of the Internet on political attitudes and behaviors, because the research design allows for causal claims about the effects of the Internet.

While the results were promising, the research design had several weaknesses. The first major weakness was weak measures of political interest. Instead of assessing political interest, a scale was created that asked about whether the site inspired the participant to learn more about politics, increased participant's likelihood of talking about politics, and increased the participant's likelihood of voting in the November election (Lupia & Philpot, 2005). The measures are problematic on several fronts. First, questions about behavioral intentions (voting, talking politics) are unreliable measures of future behavior. Johnson and Kaye (2003) validate this criticism as they find that Internet use has a statistically significant effect on intentions to vote, but no significant effect on actual voting behavior. Additionally, the questions ask respondents to comment on causality (the effects of the site on their desire to learn more, vote, talk politics) and these types of questions are highly criticized in survey research (Fowler, 1995; Groves et al., 2009).

Finally, the survey questions lack face validity in that they do not directly assess interest in politics. The authors tie their measures to early works by Sidney Verba, but Sidney Verba has since modified his approach to measuring political interest (see Verba et al., 1995). Verba et al. (1995) opt for a measure that asks respondents to evaluate their interest in politics using a scale from "not at all" to "very" interested. Verba et al. also evaluate interest in local politics

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separately from national politics recognizing that there could be differences in interest depending on jurisdiction. In sum, Lupia and Philpot's measures of political interest have serious validity issues.

While the experimental manipulation may reflect how online news was consumed in 2000, online news has evolved since then. Lupia and Philpot's (2005) manipulation was exposure to the Web White & Blue Network -a network including several news organizations. Some respondents were also directed to specific websites, such as CNN, Fox News, and the New York Times. Respondents were exposed to one or two websites for five minutes each. The manipulation is restricted to online versions of traditional news sources and does not reflect the wide diversity of information available online (Lupia & Philpot, 2005). One of the key mechanisms through which online news can stimulate political interest is by expanding the stories and sources of information available to citizens (Boulianne, 2011). To understand how online news may affect political interest and engagement, we need to allow participants to fully access the wealth and diversity of information online.

Additionally, the study does not consider the alternative methods through which people consume online news. Social networks are a key mechanism for the distribution of news and this process is simplified in the online environment (Boulianne, 2011; de Waal & Schoenbach, 2008; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Shah, Cho, Eveland & Kwak, 2005). Online news sources are easily shared with family and friends through social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter. Research suggests that interactive forms of information exchange, such as email and social network sites, can significantly affect engagement in certain types of political activities (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kidd & Phillips, 2007; Shah et al., 2005; Towner, 2013). The Canadian Media Research Consortium (CMRC, 2011a) reports that one in two young adults



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value social networks as a news source. Young adults rank this source and online news in general as the most important sources of information (CMRC, 2011b). While social media is important, traditional news sources and aggregator websites, such as Yahoo news, are also important (PEW Research Center, 2012a,b).

The experimental manipulation has other weaknesses as well. The exposure to the manipulation was for a short period of time, e.g., 5 to 10 minutes (Lupia & Philpot, 2005), which is unlikely to provide any substantive and enduring effects on political interest. In addition, the study did not include a manipulation check, i.e., a verification methods to confirm that participants were exposed to the website. A manipulation check is critical for field experiments where the researcher cannot observe the participants during the experiment. Research suggests that youth's interest in public affairs depends on the topic and the jurisdiction (Bibby, Russell, & Rolheiser, 2009). Approximately 31% of Canadian youth reported interest in Canadian politics whereas 55% reported interest in world events (Bibby et al., 2009). Canadian youth express a higher level of interest in world events, environmental issues, and technology issues, compared to other issues, including Canadian politics (Bibby et al., 2009). As such, an experiment on online news should consider a manipulation check that examines the topic of the news stories being consumed and how these topics may differentially affect political interest and engagement.

That said, this seminal piece offered promising findings related to the effects of online news and political interest, particularly among youth. Lupia and Philpot's findings suggest that online news could influence youth's, more so than older people's, level of political interest depending on the website and participants' evaluation of the website. Based on this prior research, the key research question is: Does use of online news, operationalized as a variety of

news sources on a variety of topics and distributed through websites and social networks, affect youth's political interest?

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

First-year students at Canadian university were recruited to participate in this experiment. The choice of sample is partly based on convenience and practicality, but also based on their similarity to Canadian youth more generally.<sup>1</sup> The socioeconomic background of these first-year students is more reflective of Canadian youth in general, because of this institution's lower tuition costs compared to neighboring post-secondary institutions. The institution is transitioning away from being a community college, but still offers a variety of academic upgrading, diploma programs, and English as a Second Language Courses. Community colleges are arguably more representative of the general public than top-ranked universities (Hargittai, 2010; Hooghe, Stolle,

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<sup>1</sup> A common approach to establishing the representativeness of a sample is to compare the sample's characteristics to the Census profile for the region (marital status, education, income, household structure, age). In the case of youth, this strategy makes little sense. Their education status is in transition and their income is likely lower than the general population as a result of their student status. Furthermore, their marital status and household structure have little consequence for the variables under study. Because these variables do not matter to the core analysis, this information was not collected as part of the design. In terms of gender, the ratio is 50:50 for this age group (Statistics Canada, 2012). The sample was stratified to ensure this distribution.

Mahéo, & Vissers, 2010). First-year students are likely more representative of Canadian youth, in general, than their colleagues who are closer to degree completion.

Students as a subgroup of youth are interesting case studies for the research question under study. Students are critical to the popularity of online news sources (CMRC, 2011a; Eveland, Martin, & Seo, 2004). Among current college and university students, voter turnout is lower compared to prior generations of students (Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, & Torney-Purta, 2006). Furthermore, among students, access to and use of the Internet is nearly universal.

The research design is unique in terms of employing a random sample of students, rather than recruiting students from a particular class or from a specific discipline. Random recruitment is not the norm in research using student participants (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; D'haenens, Jankowski, & Heuvelman, 2004; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 1997; Towner, 2013; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Westerick, Kleinman, & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2013). Recruiting from a single discipline can be problematic for several reasons. First, a discipline-specific sample likely differs greatly from the population of youth, compared to a cross-section of university students. For example, the demographic make-up of disciplines can be highly unrepresentative, e.g., over or under-representation of women. Furthermore, political interest, the key variable under analysis, can vary greatly by discipline. For example, recruiting participants from political science classes would produce a sample biased towards politically interested youth. Likewise recruiting students from a Communications class is likely to yield a sample that has more sophisticated knowledge of the news, compared to youth in general. Finally, recruiting from a particular class can be problematic, because the class content may produce a change in the outcome between the pretest

and posttest. For example, class discussion of current events in sociology classes may produce a change between the pretest and posttest measurements that is unrelated to the manipulation.

### **Procedure**

**Recruitment.** The study was conducted as a pilot test in 2010 then repeated in 2011. Student records were acquired from the Registrar's office. Each year, this list of approximately 4200 first-year students was screened to ensure students had a Canadian mailing address, validate that their age was between 18 to 30 years, and exclude students who are enrolled in English as a Second Language classes at this university (see Boulianne, 2013). Approximately 76% of respondents were born between 1990 and 1992, which means they were 18 to 21 years old during data collection, depending on which year they participated. The list was stratified by gender, then a random sample was selected to participate in this study. Approximately 1600 students were invited to participate in the study (800 males, 800 females) during the two years of data collection. Year to year variations are accounted for in the analyses.

Data collection occurred in two waves (pretest/posttest). During the first wave (January 2010, 2011), students were offered a prepaid, \$5 incentive for participating in a web survey (see Boulianne, 2013). At wave 2, participants were invited to an in-person meeting, which included completion of another web-based survey (March 2010, 2011). If the participant was part of an experimental group, they were also asked to use a variety of news sources for a 20 minute period prior to completing the survey. Participants who attended the wave 2 meeting were given a \$15 incentive.

Approximately 60.4% of participants completed most of the questions on the first wave of the survey (AAPOR Response Rate 2). AAPOR Response Rate calculation adjusts the sample

to exclude ineligible cases, e.g., participants who were no longer students

([http://www.aapor.org/For\\_Researchers/5850.htm#.U5XkYShhsTA](http://www.aapor.org/For_Researchers/5850.htm#.U5XkYShhsTA)). Version 2 of the calculation includes partially and fully completed surveys, whereas version 1 of the calculation includes fully completed surveys only. Approximately 17.5% of participants completed the entire second wave survey (AAPOR Response Rate 1). The lower response rate at wave 2 is partially explained by scheduling issues. Approximately 30% of participants agreed to participate, but we were unable to find a meeting time that accommodated the research assistants (who were full-time undergraduate students) and the participants.

**Design.** The Solomon four-group experimental design was used for this study (Figure 1). The design involves assigning half of participants to a control group and half of participants to an experimental group who receives the manipulation. Unlike the classic experimental design, half of the sample is assigned to receive the pretest (e.g., invited to participate in wave 1) and the other half do not receive the pretest survey. This design has advantages over the classic experimental design in terms of examining methodological quality, including testing effects and non-response bias. Participants may remember the politics questions from the pretest/wave 1 survey, which may affect their decision to participate in wave 2 and their responses during the posttest survey. Specifically, if politics is of little interest to them, an appropriate expectation given the literature, they may decide not to participate in the next wave, which will detrimentally affect the validity of the study. The Solomon four-group experimental design enables an analysis of these methodological issues.

These methodological issues will be evaluated in two ways. First, responses can be compared for those who participated in wave 1 (only) to those who completed both wave 1 and wave 2. Second, at wave 2, a “fresh” set of participants (unexposed to wave 1 measurement) can

be compared to participants who completed both waves of the project. Specifically, the experimental group who completed both waves can be compared to the experimental group who completed wave 2 only (and likewise for the control groups). These approaches to the analysis can evaluate and account for testing effects and non-response bias.

**Manipulation.** Approximately half of the respondents received the experimental manipulation and the other half did not. The experimental manipulation involved asking participants to perform a series of tasks intended to reflect how online news can influence political interest. Tedesco (2007) also used a series of tasks as an experimental manipulation. This type of manipulation offers greater validity as it reflects true and varied patterns of consumption of online news. These varied types of activities reflect how the Internet is used. People do not *just* use traditional online news sources, they use a combination of search techniques, especially young people (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013).

The experiment was conducted in a laboratory setting. Using a series of tasks as a manipulation works better in a lab setting where the researcher has greater assurance that the manipulation was effectively delivered. Tedesco (2007) and other field experiments (Knobloch-Waterwick & Meng, 2009; Lupia & Philpot, 2005) do not include a manipulation check, which leaves questions as to whether the participants were truly exposed to the media sources and what stories they were exposed to. The three tasks are as follows:

- 1) Respondents were asked to search for information on a political, social, or economic issue that they find to be interesting. This task reflects the value of the Internet in terms of the diversity of content. This task allows respondents to employ both traditional online news sources and other independent news sources. Previous studies focus on the use of traditional media (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000, 2002; Lupia & Philpot, 2005) or faux media, e.g., news

websites constructed specifically for the experiment (Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson, & Kurpius, 2008; Eveland et al., 2004; Westerick et al., 2013). Both of these approaches presume what is interesting to the user. In the case of traditional media, the online editors select stories for users whereas in the faux media examples, stories are selected (and sometimes written) by the research team. Recent research on media effects explores the impact of having participants choose their online news sources (Drunkman, Fein, & Leeper, 2012). Researchers have found that media effects endure longer when participants select their sources (Drunkman et al., 2012).

Participants were asked to take approximately five minutes to conduct this task. The amount of time is based on Hargittai's (2002) observational study, which suggests that people take approximately four minutes to complete an information-searching task related to political issues. Because youth are faster searchers than older adults (Hargittai, 2002), five minutes should be plenty of time to conduct this task. Participants were asked to identify the source of their information, which offers a validity check on the performance of the task, i.e., manipulation check.

The most popular topics were related to politics (referring to a political figure, government policy), international conflict (unrest in the Middle East), and health care (wait times). Approximately one third of participants listed an established Canadian news sources, such as CBC, Globe & Mail, Edmonton Journal, CTV, or a Sunmedia publication, as their source of information.

2) Respondents were asked if they received a political message sent to them via email or through other communication tools (e.g., Facebook message) about a political, social or economic issue during the past 30 days. If they did, they were asked to find the message in their records. The task is meant to capture the alternative ways in which users can assess online news.

This search activity is expected to take five minutes. As a validity check, participants were asked to read the message and identify the content of the message and who sent them the message. Again politics and international conflict were at the top of the list of topics as well as international disasters, e.g., earthquakes.

3) Participants were asked to visit a traditional news website for approximately 10 minutes. To simulate natural news consumption patterns, respondents were not given any direction on what to read or how much time to spend on specific articles. They were instructed to read what interests them. Several studies exposed participants to news websites for 3 to 5 minutes (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Lupia & Philpot, 2005; Westerwick et al., 2013). The short duration of their manipulation limits the possibility of enduring media effects on attitudes such as political interest. Participants were asked to report back the news stories that they read, including the story that was most interesting to them. This “report back” is expected to encourage them to process, not skim, the information. This “report back” also serves as a manipulation check. For this part of the manipulation, the most popular local newspaper’s website was used. Of the multiple stories that participants read, the most popular types of stories were crime, hockey, politics, health care, and international conflict.

**Measures.** Respondents were asked “Thinking about your local community, how interested are you in local community politics and local community affairs?” Response options were: not at all interested (0), slightly interested (1), moderately interested (2), very interested (3), and extremely interested (4). The measure uses an identical five-point response scale as the American National Election Study (2008-9) panel study. However, the question wording is based on work by Verba et al. (1995), which distinguishes interest in local politics from interest



in politics at other levels of government. As mentioned, youth's interest in public affairs is specific to topic and jurisdiction (Bibby et al., 2009).

### **Analysis**

Comparing group means is the most straightforward analysis approach for interpreting changes across time and between groups. However, this approach is weak for several reasons. First, it does not take into account heterogeneity among participants (Frees, 2004). Participants start out with different levels of political interest. For example, after using online news, a participant may change their level of political interest from not at all (0) to slightly (1); another participant may change their level of political interest from moderately (2) to very (3). These nuances are lost when focusing on group means. Second, the change in political interest at wave 1 and wave 2 may differ in magnitude for different participants. Some participants may increase their interest by two units on the five-point scale, others by only one unit. The comparison of group means computes the average change based on the group means at two points in time, which assumes a homogeneous effect among participants.

Furthermore, the comparison of group means approach is weak for assessing how testing effects might affect the observed relationship between online news use and political interest. Such an analysis requires a multivariate analysis approach, which accounts for testing effects when estimating the effect of online news use on political interest. In addition to testing effects, a variety of other factors could influence the impact of the experimental manipulation on political interest, including prior experience with the news website included in the manipulation. As an alternative to the group mean comparison approach, a series of multivariate ordinary least squares regression models are presented.

## Results

On a scale of 0 to 4, the average level of political interest at wave 1 was 1.40 with a standard deviation of 0.95. Upon conclusion of wave 1, participants were randomly assigned to be part of an experimental group or a control group (Figure 1). The random assignment process created two groups who had equivalent levels of political interest at wave 1. That said, the participants assigned to the experimental group *who completed wave 2* reported higher, on average, levels of political interest at wave 1 ( $M = 1.62, SD = 1.01, n = 47$ ), than the experimental participants who *did not complete wave 2* ( $M = 1.33, SD = 0.93, n = 190$ ). This difference is small and not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $p = .061$ ). This small difference could be due to non-response bias or a testing effect. Either way, the differences validate attention to methodological issues. With a classic experiment model, the researcher would not be able to account for these methodological issues. The Solomon design does allow for such analysis. Using multivariate analysis techniques, rather than group mean comparisons, the researcher can isolate the effects of the experimental manipulation on the dependent variable, controlling for testing effects.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Table 1 combines the two experimental groups (Groups B,C) and the two control groups (Groups A,D) and presents the effects of being exposed to online news sources. The regression model also includes a variable that identifies whether or not the individual completed the pretest. Groups A and B have a value of one on this dummy variable, whereas Groups C and D have a value of zero on this variable (see Figure 1). There are small differences in political interest at wave 2 based on whether or not the individual completed the pretest/wave 1 ( $p = .030$ , Table 1). Accounting for these methodological issues, there is still a significant effect of the experimental

manipulation (online news) on political interest for those exposed to the news sources ( $p < .001$ , Table 1).

Political interest is higher at wave 2 for those who received the experimental manipulation, i.e., used online news (Groups B,C) compared to those who did not receive the experiment manipulation, i.e., did not use online news (Groups A,D). Political interest is a half point higher on the five-point scale for the experimental groups, compared to the control groups ( $p < .001$ ). There are no differences in political interest at wave 2 based on the year that the participant participated in the study ( $p = .290$ ). In sum, political interest at wave 2 is higher for those who used online news sources, compared to those who did not use online news sources.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

In Table 2, wave 1 political interest and the group assignment variable (experimental group=1, control group=0) are used to predict wave 2 political interest. The analysis is based on the two groups who received the pretest (Groups A,B). When prior level of political interest is entered into the model, the effect size decreases slightly, but remains significant ( $p = .020$ ). The model also controls for whether the respondent reported having ever used the local news website (Table 2). Approximately, 65% of participants have accessed this website in the past.

Controlling for prior use of this website, the main effect of the experimental manipulation, included the use of this news website and other online sources, remains significant. In other words, this prior use of the local news website does not diminish the effect of the experimental manipulation on political interest.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Table 3 examines the effects of the experimental manipulation on political interest depending on the content of the news consumed, i.e., the topic of stories that participants chose

to read, the number of stories read, and whether they received news stories through social networks. For this analysis, only those participants who completed the experiment are included (Groups B,C). The analysis is based on post-data collection coding of responses provided during the “report back” process. One variable assesses whether or not the participant reported reading a story that explicitly involved political content, e.g., referring to a political figure, government policy or international conflict. Approximately 69% of participants read a political news story. The stories with explicit political content are more likely to increase experimental groups members’ political interest ( $p = .005$ ), than stories without explicit political content. Another variable captures the number of stories read: one story read (0), two or three stories read (1), or four or more stories read (2). Approximately half of experimental participants read two or three stories. The number of stories read does not have a significant effect on political interest at wave 2 ( $p = .378$ ). Approximately 57% of experimental participants recently received a message about a social, economic or political issue through their social networks. Whether or not they received such a message does not have an effect on political interest at wave 2 ( $p = .897$ ).

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

### **Discussion**

Overall, the results affirm the value of online news in generating political interest among a random sample of students at a Canadian university. When online news is operationalized to include a variety of news sources on a variety of topics and news exchanged through social networks, online news can increase political interest. The findings are more definitive than Lupia and Philpot’s (2005) findings, which determined that the effects of online news on political interest varied by website and by participants’ evaluation of these websites.

Unlike Lupia and Philpot's experiment, this experiment allowed participants to use a variety of online news sources and included a manipulation check that captured what news and how much news participants consumed. The findings suggest that the content of the news stories matter. Merely receiving an email about an issue or consuming a variety of stories is insufficient to affect political interest. Instead, the content needs to be explicitly political to have a significant effect on political interest. Many participants read an abundance of stories in the short time interval provided during the experiment, but these participants did not report higher levels of political interest unless at least one of these stories was about politics. While this research establishes the frequency with which news is circulated through social networks among youth, the findings suggest that merely receiving this news is insufficient to peak interest. Alternatively, like news stories, the effectiveness of this news in cultivating political interest depends on the content. Unfortunately, the sample size limits an analysis of how the topic of messages distributed through social networks affects political interest.

In sum, the findings provide support for the argument that online news can stimulate engagement in politics. Accounting for prior levels of political interest, use of online news significantly increased political interest compared to those who were not exposed to online news. Because political interest is so highly correlated with voting and other political activities (Smets & Van Ham, 2013), this increased interest could lead to increases in political engagement. This study suggests that the Internet can expand political participation to a broader set of citizens. In contrast, others have argued that the Internet will only affect those already interested and engaged in the political process (Norris, 2000).

While the findings offer support for the relationship between online news and political interest, questions remain about the degree of generalizability to a broader audience. The group

of participants is a sample of youth, a demographic group that is resistant to traditional news sources and reluctant to participate in politics. If twenty minutes of online news use can significantly affect political interest for such an impervious group, an effect among a broader audience should be easier to achieve. Furthermore, if online news can influence political interest for even a subset of youth, i.e., students, this effect may help decrease the age gap in voting. As mentioned, voter turnout is lower among current college and university students compared to prior generations of students (Beaumont et al., 2006).

Further research should explore more long term interventions and their effects on political interest. More long term exposure to news might have a greater and enduring impact on political interest. Among the student population, this type of intervention may be more feasible than among youth in general. Instructors can encourage students to regularly use online news sources and share these sources with their classmates. Since content matters, instructors might want to specifically encourage the consumption of political news.

Further research should also examine the role of social networks in news consumption and its effect on political interest and engagement. This experiment had an insufficient sample size to examine the content of social messaging on political interest. The content of these social messages is important as demonstrated by the analysis of news stories and political interest. Of the three tasks included in the experimental manipulation, the researcher had the least control over this task. The researcher could not control who did and did not receive these social messages. Instead, the manipulation involved encouraging participants to review and react to the content, if they received such a message, which is similar to how surveys ask about this topic (see Cohen et al., 2012). Indeed, some researchers argue that this behavior marks a new form of political engagement among youth – participatory politics (Cohen et al., 2012). Further research

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could randomize who receives these social messages and randomize the content to investigate the impact on political interest and engagement.

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Table 1  
*Regression Analysis of Political Interest at Wave 2*

Type of Model:	Basic Effect Model			Model Controlling for Year of Data Collection			Model Examining Testing Effect		
	b (SE)	$\beta$	p	b (SE)	$\beta$	p	b (SE)	$\beta$	p
Constant	1.39 (0.10)		<.001	1.49 (0.14)		<.001	1.36 (0.15)		<.001
Experimental group=1 <i>Control group=0</i>	0.47 (0.13)	.249	<.001	0.47 (0.13)	.248	<.001	0.52 (0.13)	.274	<.001
Participated in 2011=1 <i>Participated in 2010=0</i>	-	-	-	-0.15 (0.14)	-0.073	.290	-0.22 (0.14)	-.110	.119
Received pretest=1 <i>Did not receive pretest=0</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.29 (0.13)	.156	.030
	R <sup>2</sup> = 6.18%			R <sup>2</sup> = 6.72%			R <sup>2</sup> = 8.94%		
	F(1,198) = 13.05 p < .001			F(2,197) = 7.09 p < .001			F(3,196) = 6.42 p < .001		

*Note:* n=200. Groups A, B, C, D

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Table 2  
*Regression Analysis of Lagged Political Interest*

Type of Model:	Basic Effect Model			Model Controlling for Year of Data Collection			Model Controlling for Prior Levels of Political Interest			Model Controlling for Prior Use of News Website		
	b (SE)	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	b (SE)	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	b (SE)	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	b (SE)	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Constant	1.49 (0.13)		<.001	1.96 (.23)		<.001	1.12 (0.23)		<.001	0.86 (0.27)		.002
Experimental group=1 <i>Control group=0</i>	0.49 (0.20)	.242	.014	0.48 (0.19)	.239	.013	0.38 (0.16)	.190	.020	0.38 (.16)	.188	.019
Participated in 2011=1 <i>Participated in 2010=0</i>	-	-	-	-0.59 (0.24)	-.237	.014	-0.52 (0.20)	-.210	.010	-0.42 (0.20)	-.170	.040
Wave 1 political interest	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.55 (0.09)	.518	<.001	0.54 (0.08)	.509	<.001
Ever used this website=1 <i>Never used=0</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.31 (0.17)	.148	.073
	$R^2 = 5.87\%$			$R^2 = 11.49\%$			$R^2 = 38.02\%$			$R^2 = 40.05\%$		
	F(1,100) = 6.24 <i>p</i> = .014			F(2,99) = 6.43 <i>p</i> = .002			F(3,98) = 20.04 <i>p</i> < .001			F(4,97) = 16.20 <i>p</i> < .001		

Note: n=102. Groups A and B

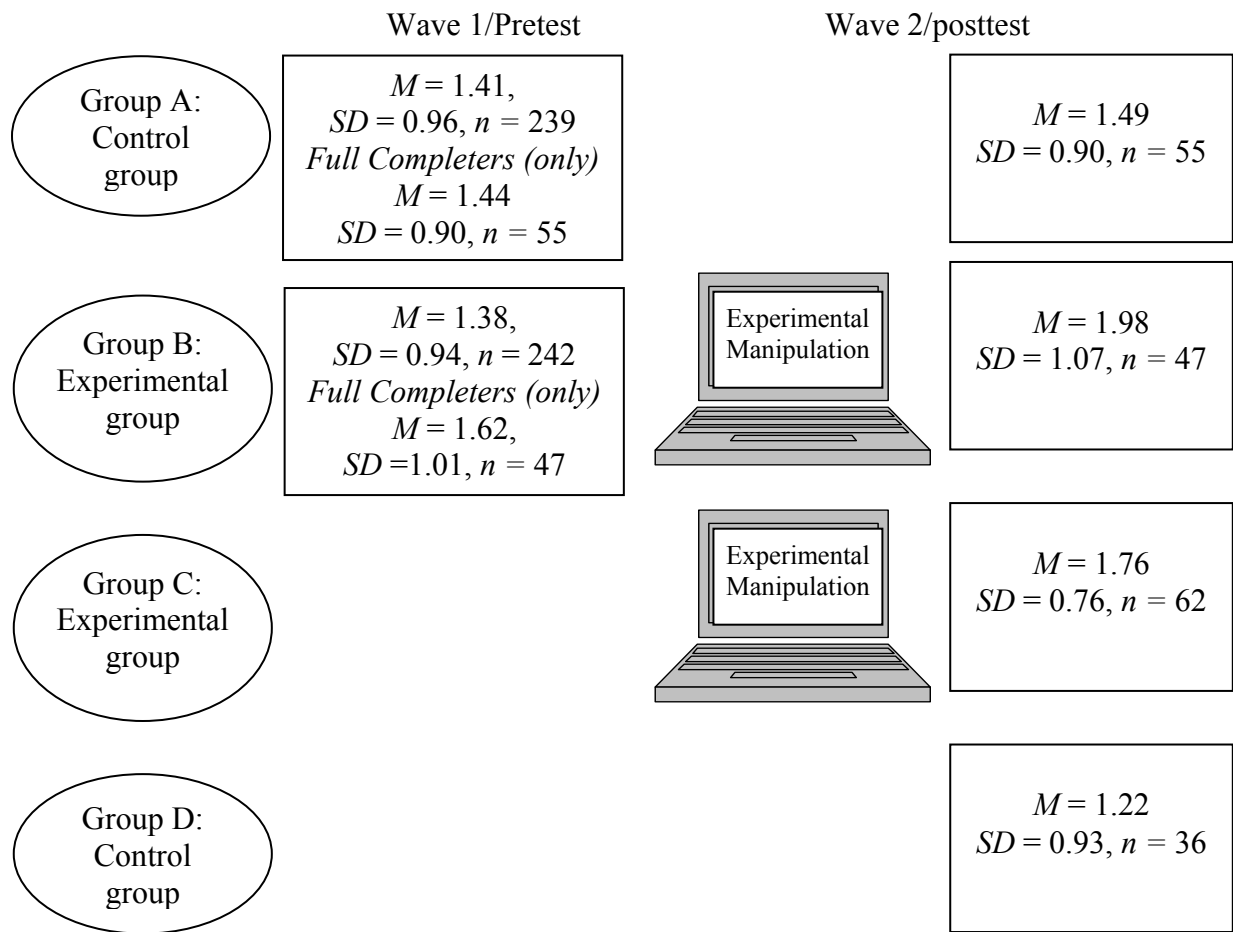
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Table 3

*Regression Analysis of Manipulation Content on Political Interest at Wave 2*

Type of Model:	Type of Content			Variety of Content			Received news message via networks		
	b (SE)	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	b (SE)	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	b (SE)	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Constant	1.45 (0.16)		<.001	1.64 (0.24)		<.001	1.85 (0.14)		<.001
Any political content=1 <i>No political content=0</i>	0.55 (0.19)	.273	.005	-	-	-	-	-	-
Number of news stories consumed	-	-	-	0.14 (0.16)	.087	.378	-	-	-
Received email message about news=1 <i>No email=0</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.02 (0.18)	.013	.897
	$R^2 = 7.44\%$			$R^2 = 0.76\%$			$R^2 = 0.00\%$		
	F(1,102) = 8.20 <i>p</i> = .005			F(1,103) = 0.79 <i>p</i> = .378			F(1,106) = 0.02 <i>p</i> = .897		

*Note:* n=104-108. Groups B, C



**Figure 1: Descriptive Statistics of Wave 1 and Wave 2 Political Interest**