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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the process by which university students with a high interest in politics and public affairs incorporate new information into their understanding of politics and public affairs, a process referred to as civic knowledge integration.

Design – This study utilized a qualitative research design that consisted of focus group interviews and essay questions.

Setting – Two large four-year Midwestern public universities and two four-year East

coast private universities in the United States of America in 2008 and 2010.

Subjects – A total of 65 undergraduate and graduate (masters) students participated in the focus group interviews and answered essay questions by e-mail.

Methods – In 2008, the researcher conducted 11 focus groups consisting of 5 to 7 participants per group. In 2010, additional data were collected from students at another large four-year Midwestern public university who responded by e-mail to essay questions that were adapted from those used in the focus

groups. Recruitment of participants was achieved by contacting professors of media and political science at the universities and targeting students with interest in media, politics, and public affairs, and who were politically active. Course credit or a small monetary incentive was offered to students as compensation. Data resulting from the focus group and essay responses were combined and imported into the QDA Miner software. Data analysis, which used some techniques of grounded theory, was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, 120 analyzable subsets were identified, and open coding of 36 subsets was performed to determine themes. These themes were then modified and renamed using an axial and selective coding process. Examples of resulting topics included collaborative layering of ideas, comparison of differing viewpoints, and monitorial scanning. The second phase involved coding of the 120 subsets, and 65 subgroups that focused on civic knowledge integration were identified. Ultimately, open, thematic coding of the 65 subsets was performed to identify comments that contained the most common themes.

Main Results – An analysis of the data revealed that participants used the resulting themes as self-guided learning strategies when searching the Internet for civic knowledge integration, the process by which university students with a high interest in politics and public affairs incorporate new information into their understanding of these areas. One of the strategies used was a two-step process of monitorial scanning and opinion sampling. Monitorial scanning involves the careful selection of search engines in order to scan the news and determine their potential levels of interest, and the use of online encyclopedias such as Wikipedia to locate background information and other details. Opinion sampling involves the process of sorting the sources found, such as blogs and candidates' web pages. Another strategy used was verification (cross-checking), which consisted of checking multiple sources to find more information on a particular news item or news show, such as those watched on CNN.com. Comparison of differing and opposing viewpoints was another strategy used, that

involved the comparing of information about political candidates' perspectives or views to justify their own opinions. Finally, collaborative layering of ideas was a strategy that involved participation in online forums, such as Facebook. This strategy provided participants with the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions globally, and to contribute to a change in a set practice.

Conclusion – Through the use of strategies for self-guided learning, participants were able to add new information to their knowledge base and to develop new points of view. These students developed advanced search strategies and took pleasure in finding opposing perspectives, and as a result, enhanced their critical thinking skills. The conclusions also increased general knowledge of why young people used specific online platforms, information resources, or social media sites to enhance their understanding of politics and public affairs. These findings may also challenge media and political science to investigate the long-term effects of self-guided learning strategies for civic knowledge integration practiced by some young people.

Commentary

This study examined how university students with a high interest in politics and media use the Internet to learn about politics and public affairs, a process referred to as civic knowledge integration. The findings build upon experiences reported in a study by Moeller, Kühne, and De Vreese (2018) that surveyed Dutch youth who had not yet reached voting age. Moeller et al. found that exposure to digital news influenced their political participation, and developed their sense of civic duty and information efficacy. In another study, Vromen, Loader, Xenos, and Bailo (2016) surveyed young people in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, and found that social media had become a regular source of information on politics and that youth engagement through social media is a form of political participation worthy of our attention.

Glynn's (2006) "Critical Appraisal Checklist" confirmed that this study was valid in several areas: Institutional Review Board approval was received, and focus group interview and essay questions were provided. Also, results provided a descriptive summary, with applications and areas for further research. However, concerning the study population, it's unclear if there was a total of 65 participants for the focus group interviews and online essays, or just for the focus groups. Knowing the exact number of participants in the focus groups and responders to essay questions could increase confidence in the study design overall. Also, the homogeneity of the study participants may have been a limitation. Knowing whether the survey tools were pre-tested would also ensure other researchers that the questions were understandable and designed to elicit the desired outcomes. The results of the data analysis described two types of coding used – axial coding and open-thematic coding – both of which are techniques of grounded theory design. A study by Moghaddan (2006) describes axial and open thematic coding as two different approaches, and since it is unlikely that both were used, the coding process is unclear. In terms of the results, considering the ten-year gap between collecting and publishing the data, and given the degree to which the Internet and the social media landscape has changed during this period, one may question how relevant these findings are to how today's young people acquire, evaluate, and share political and public affairs news.

There is a significant focus on "fake news" these days, and while this may not have been a big issue in 2008 when the study began, these results could inspire librarians who are interested in this topic. Librarians could incorporate "fake news" into their curricula. They could also highlight the self-guided learning strategies used by study participants, and create exciting and engaging active learning sessions in the areas of monitorial scanning, opinion sampling, verification, comparing viewpoints, and collaborative layering of ideas.

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