Limbaugh's Social Media Nightmare: Facebook and Twitter as Spaces for Political Action

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SYMPOSIUM: RUSH LIMBAUGH AND
THE SANDRA FLUKE INCIDENT

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When Rush Limbaugh made his now famous remarks about Sandra Fluke's Congressional testimony he set off a social media firestorm. The ensuing backlash cost Limbaugh many prominent advertisers and damaged his public image. In this study, we examine the characteristics that motivated some to engage in the social media conversation while others remained on the sidelines. We find that political information efficacy, or confidence that one has the knowledge and skills necessary to participate, dictate political engagement online. We discuss the implications of this finding for radio, communication and media scholars, and healthy democratic deliberation among young Americans.

In late February 2012, the ongoing debate over healthcare reform created a media scandal when conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh referred to Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown University law student, as a ''slut'' and ''prostitute'' after she appeared in front of a U.S. Congressional hearing. Limbaugh said in regards to Fluke, ''She wants to be paid to have sex. She's having so much sex she can't afford contraception. She wants you and me and the taxpayers to pay her to have sex'' (as quoted in Kain, 2012, para. 4). Public outrage was almost instantaneous.

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House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi referred to his comments as "vicious and inappropriate attacks," while Republican Senator Scott Brown described them as "reprehensible" (as quoted in Geiger, 2012). At least 30 sponsors, including many major advertisers (Sears, AOL, and Allstate among them) dropped Limbaugh in reaction to the ensuing public pressure (Timpane, 2012).

While this type of media controversy is certainly not new (e.g., Fitzgerald, Sapolsky, & McClung, 2009; Huxford, 2011; Raffel, 2008), nor is it surprising to see Limbaugh incite such polarized responses (Appel, 2009; Harris, Mayer, Saulino, & Schiller, 1996; Larson, 1997; Swain, 1999), the involvement of social media made this flare-up unique ("Did social media," 2012; Kain, 2012; Palmeri, 2012; Peck, 2012; Subramanian, 2012; Timpane, 2012; Weister, 2012). Specifically, social media was used to quickly marshal a campaign that pressured advertisers to drop Limbaugh—a campaign that had *Time Magazine* (Subramanian, 2012), *Business Week* (Palmeri, 2012), *Slate.com* ("Did social media," 2012), and *Forbes Magazine* (Kain, 2012) all wondering if social media had permanently damaged his brand. Because of the significant role played by social media in this controversy, the Limbaugh-Fluke firestorm stands as a perfect example of the media interconnectedness Holbert and Benoit (2009) invite scholars to attend to. For while media are often studied individually, it is the interaction across media platforms that often produces the most interesting case studies.

The Limbaugh-Fluke story illustrates how social media provide new opportunities for political participation. In this instance, social media acted as an accelerant for debate that the radio broadcast generated. Radio was not the medium of political information dissemination, as is typically the case, but was rather the object of controversy. Social media created an avenue of engagement for people who are not known to follow talk radio (especially younger citizens—see Albarran et al., 2007). It is therefore important to examine the characteristics of those who participated in the social media debate about the Limbaugh-Fluke controversy. The aim of this study is to understand what characteristics are most associated with the decision to participate in the Facebook and Twitter debate about Limbaugh's comments and, by proxy, the national conversation regarding access to healthcare. In essence, this project examines social media as a potential space for individuals to digitally rally when sparked by hot-button issues on talk radio, therefore extending the findings of Zerbinos (1995) into the digital age. Prior to the presentation of our study we consider past research on the nature of social and traditional media (especially radio) and the implications the combination of these media for democratic practice.

Radio in the Age of Social Media

Talk radio has been an important component of political engagement (Hollander, 1995), especially with regard to disseminating information and shaping political views (Barker, 1998; Barker & Knight, 2000; Bennett, 2009). Those who listen

to political talk radio often join an informal social network that encourages voting, contacting members of Congress, and donating money to political campaigns (Barker, 1998; Hollander, 1995). As listeners consume political information from the radio they achieve higher levels of knowledge about public affairs relative to non-listeners (Bennett, 2009). Active talk radio listeners use the medium to gain political knowledge, and these listeners are more politically involved than those who do not listen (Perse & Butler, 2005). Clearly, then, the radio influences the political process through information dissemination, attitude formation, and engagement with key figures and groups (Barker, 1998; Barker & Knight, 2000; Bennett, 2009). However, the changing landscape of traditional outlets has driven radio programs to branch out to more interactive content (Ala-Fossi, Lax, O'Neill, Cand, & Shaw, 2008) especially targeting a younger audience with new technology (Albarran et al., 2007) including Facebook (Johnson, 2012; Seelig, 2008) and Twitter (Ferguson & Greer, 2011).

As the larger media environment has fragmented in response to the proliferation of online technologies, radio has continued to alter its format in order to remain a relevant player in this changing landscape (''The Road Ahead,'' 2006). The 2004 Annual Report on the State of Journalism notes that traditional news outlets must find new ways to reach audiences if they are going to stay viable players in the growing news market (''2004 Annual Report,'' 2004). Audiences are more often turning to online sources to obtain information and to supplement the information they receive from traditional outlets (English, Sweetser, & Ancu, 2011). However, there is still some question about whether social media can contribute to political engagement in the same way that traditional outlets such as radio have (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

The character of participation encouraged by social media is also important. The rise of social media is occurring at a time when media is highly fragmented and polarized (Bimber & Davis, 2003 Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011; Sunstein, 2007). The proliferation of partisan media is especially pronounced on talk radio, cable news, and political blogs (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Stroud, 2010; Sunstein, 2007). Talk radio hosts such as Limbaugh have succeeded in cultivating a partisan audience who enjoy his polemic brand of analysis (Botes & Langdon, 2006; Rubin & Step, 2000). Though Limbaugh's influence on public opinion has been questioned (Jones, 1998), there are many examples of talk radio demonstrably affecting the outcomes of public policy debates (Zerbinos, 1995). The nature of this influence has caused some scholars to openly worry about the potential danger to healthy democratic deliberation posed by radio hosts of Limbaugh's style (Jamieson & Capella, 2008; Kay, Ziegelmueller, & Minch, 1998).

While the amount of actual polarization may be limited by the large number of Americans who enjoy a fairly diverse media diet (Brundidge, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010; Kaye & Johnson, 2006; Kobayashi, 2010; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009), the fragmented state of media allows those who are not interested to opt out, ceding the political debate to a vocal minority. Prior (2007) found that the rise of entertainment media have provided an opportunity

for those only passively interested in politics (a group that is also among the most moderate and persuadable in the electorate) to opt out of the political conversation completely. In 1927, John Dewey warned that the rise of entertainment via ''the movie, radio, cheap reading matter, and motor car'' (p. 193) contributed significantly to the decline of the public sphere. Almost a century later the proliferation of entertainment media has surely eclipsed his wildest imagination. Nevertheless, it is unclear that the changing media dynamic is all bad. As has already been discussed, talk radio yields both increased political engagement (Hollander, 1995) and divisive, partisan propaganda (Kay, Ziegelmueller, & Minch, 1998). We might imagine that social media achieves a similar compromise, acting as a source of distraction and disengagement from politics, but also providing new avenues for the spread of information.

Indeed, research is already finding that social media have changed the way political communication occurs, both in interpersonal and online contexts (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Smith & Rainie, 2008). This influence is manifest in political engagement, evaluation of issue appeals, levels of political information efficacy, civic engagement, political interest, political trust, political efficacy, and political participation (English, Sweetser, & Ancu, 2011; Katz et al., 2001; Shah et al., 2005; Wang, 2007). Although some studies find that online political participation does little to alter the democratic process (McChesney, 2000), other research shows that the Internet facilitates greater political engagement through its egalitarian design, especially for young citizens (Delli Carpini, 2000). This is particularly relevant to the popularity of social media, which many individuals use to participate in politics (Hesseldahl, MacMillan, & Kharif, 2008; Marchese, 2008; Owen, 2008).

While the study of social media's influence on political communication is burgeoning, there is value in focusing on the combination of social media with traditional outlets (Benoit & Hansen, 2004; English et al., 2011; Johnson, 2012). When paired with radio, users rely on social media to be entertained, to control their media experience, and to gather information (Johnson, 2012). Because social media are interactive, engagement can mean political talk that spans overlapping groups of friends and acquaintances. The combination of interactivity with other media channels can powerfully influence political information efficacy, external efficacy, and cynicism (English et al., 2011; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Wang, 2007). Thus, the integration of social media with traditional outlets (e.g., radio, television) may increase the participatory potential of media as a whole. Our study tests this possibility by examining whether social media broadens participation in political debate.

In context of the Limbaugh-Fluke story, radio is not only a participant in the discussion, it is also the object of controversy. Public reaction played prominently in the Limbaugh/Fluke controversy. Bird (2003) argues that ''people like scandal. Scandal sells newspapers and tabloids, keeps people in front of their televisions, and provides endless opportunities for conversation'' (p. 22). Because of the audience's appetite for scandal, they tend to have extended life in media coverage—and often

require public apologia from those involved (Benoit, 1995). This is heightened by social media, which many citizens turn to as a supplement for online news coverage (Kohut, 2008). Social media create the conditions for the rapid spread of information, as salacious stories can be captured in real time, posted online, and shared rapidly through Twitter and Facebook.

Though political scandals may begin when reported in the mainstream media, social media can grow and amplify the coverage, especially when users engage the news organizations' social media profiles (Mitchell, Rosensteil, & Christian, 2012). Weister (2012) notes that although traditional media outlets picked up the Limbaugh story quickly, ''social media networks were up in arms before the first evening news broadcast could address the subject'' (para. 1). This generated the online pressure that cost Limbaugh so many of his advertisers (Weister, 2012). The scandal is thus the catalyst for a very public discussion of a previously limited debate about women's access to contraception. Social media became the agent for the spread of information, the discussion of this information, and action (activism) related to the controversy. So while scandal creates an inroad for public debate, and social media provide the medium for the discussion, a question remains about what value all of this talk has for democratic culture as a whole.

Social Media and Political Talk

Democracy is founded on a belief in the value of the collective resolution of problems through popular assent (Dewey, 1927). For this reason, political talk is itself a public good, a sign of the relative health of our democratic culture (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). In spite of this, political talk is somewhat infrequent in contemporary American society (Eliasoph, 1998) and most people avoid the controversy that often results from a spirited political debate (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Social media provide a potential resolution to this by making it easier to engage in such conversations. Moreover, with increased potential for political talk there may be more deliberation as people share personal perspectives and learn the opinions of those within their social media network (Smith & Rainie, 2008). Furthermore, the mere act of going online to participate in a political discussion has a positive influence on political participation offline, including participation in rallies, donating to campaigns, and voting (Katz et al., 2001). Hence, online engagement can result in offline political action. In the instance of the Limbaugh controversy, much of this activism took the form of political consumerism.

Political consumerism is typically understood as the practice of making purchasing decisions (e.g., boycotting, boycotting, donating to a campaign—or encouraging someone to do the same) based on a set of political or ethical values (Sandovici & Davis, 2010). News consumption encourages political consumerism through conversation about political controversies (Shah et al., 2007). Although political consumerism does not always end in policy changes, engaging in this kind of behavior broadens the scope of politics beyond the government (Stolle, Hooghe,

& Micheletti, 2005). In regards to the Limbaugh scandal, Facebook and Twitter users shared information online to encourage consumerist activism, as advertisers were targeted with threats of a boycott (Weister, 2012). This sent a political message to the advertisers (and possibly the show) regarding the offensiveness of Limbaugh's comments (Palmeri, 2012; Peck, 2012; Subramanian, 2012). While political consumerism is an emerging form of activism, this kind of multi-media political talk often translates into engagement offline (Shah et al., 2005; Wang, 2007). In short, we might expect that the online political talk (especially through social media) that resulted from the Limbaugh controversy may result in greater democratic participation among the participants. Furthermore, this type of activism can alter the economics of more traditional media like talk radio. For activists, social media became a weapon used to undermine the financial viability of Limbaugh's program.

While social media can be a vehicle for political engagement, then, it is unclear whether this is an extension of traditional engagement or whether social media expands the number and types of people who participate. Although many rely on social media for primarily social conversation online, political activity has become more common on these platforms (''The Road Ahead,'' 2006). ''One in three Internet users has a profile on a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace, and 40% of these (representing 10% of all adults) have used these sites to engage in political activity of some kind'' (Smith & Rainie, 2008, p. 10). This political activity is largely organic in nature, meaning it occurs as a result of being online with ''a majority of web users (52%) [who] 'come across' campaign news and information when they are going online to do something else'' (Kohut, 2008, p. 2). Even stumbling across political information can positively influence individual levels of political engagement, perhaps because the personal nature of social media makes the political process more relatable and familiar (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

In review, the rise of social media has far-reaching implications for democracy and for the role of traditional mediums in the democratic process. While media fragmentation risks polarizing the electorate, social media provide an opportunity for political talk to occur organically among potentially diverse groups. The Limbaugh-Fluke scandal presents a perfect case to examine the influence of new media in an old media context. The issue is sufficiently salacious that it could conceivably activate the politically apathetic, though it is also controversial enough to deter participation. Our study seeks to understand the characteristics that drove people to engage the social media conversation about this polemic radio host's inflammatory comments.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Limbaugh's comments were in the context of a debate about whether employers should be forced to provide health care that covers birth control for women. Because

this issue directly pertains to women's health, it may generate more interest and conversation from female participants. However, research also suggests that young women are less likely to participate in political talk because they have not been socialized in the same ways as young men (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). We thus pose the following research question:

RQ$_1$: Are women more likely than men to engage the social media discussion about the controversy?

We might also expect Democrats to participate at a higher rate than Republicans. Because Limbaugh is a conservative pundit and his comments were highly controversial, it may be the case that Republicans would prefer the controversy to simply go away and would thus be silent on the question. On the other hand, Republicans may wish to speak out either in defense of Limbaugh, in opposition to the particular health care mandate in question, or simply to distance themselves from Limbaugh's comments. It may also be expected that, because independents tend to be less interested in politics (Prior, 2007), both Republicans and Democrats would be more likely to discuss the issue than those unaffiliated with one of the two major parties. Because research cannot guide our expectations in either case, we propose a second research question:

RQ$_2$: Will political parity identification predict greater engagement in the controversy?

While we can only speculate about the role of sex and party in predicting political talk about the Limbaugh controversy, we have more theoretical guidance in other areas. People who are more confident that they possess the knowledge and skills necessary to participate (political information efficacy) are more likely to engage in political talk (Morrell, 2005; Wells & Dudash, 2007). Similarly, people who are generally cynical about democracy are less likely to engage in political behavior (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001), while those who have faith in the responsiveness of the political process (or external political efficacy) are more likely to participate (Finkel, 1985). Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

H$_1$: Those with more confidence in their personal ability to participate in politics are more likely to engage the social media discussion about the controversy.

H$_2$: Those with more cynical attitudes toward politics in general will be less likely to engage the social media discussion about the controversy.

H$_3$: Those with more belief in the political process are more likely to engage the social media discussion about the controversy.

Method

Participants

A survey was distributed to 216 undergraduate students at a major Midwestern university. The age of the sample ranged from 18–30 ($M = 20.4$, $SD = 1.6$) with 61 (28.2%) male and 153 (70.8%) female respondents. There were almost the same number of Democrats ($N = 80$, 37%) as Republicans ($N = 79$, 36.6%) and 57 (26.5%) identified either as independent or belonging to another party.

Respondents were asked to rank various sources[1] of political information based on which they used most frequently. The most frequent source was the generic category ''online news,'' with 56.1% of respondents ranking it in their top three. Facebook and Twitter were the second and third most common sources of political news in our sample, with 49.3% of respondents ranking Facebook in their top three sources of political information and 41.5% saying the same about Twitter. In all, 40.5% of our sample ranked either Facebook or Twitter as their top source of information about politics. Only 18.5% of respondents ranked radio as a top three source of political information.

Analytic Procedures

Research questions and hypotheses were tested through structural equation modeling (SEM) with ML estimation using LISREL 8.80. SEM was selected because the estimation procedures correct for unreliability in measurement and because it allows for the simultaneous estimation of relationships between multiple dependent and independent variables (Brown, 2006; Kline, 2005). Following the recommendations of Kline (2005), a measurement model was specified using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and the structural model was subsequently fit to test the hypothesized relationships.

Model fit for the CFA was evaluated using the ML χ^2 statistic. Given the sensitivity of the χ^2 statistic to sample size, model fit was assessed with reference to the Tucker-Lewis/non-normed fit index (TLI/NNFI), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Values above .90 for the TLI/NNFI and CFI are considered reasonably good fit (Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004) and RMSEA values between .05–.08 suggest reasonable fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Significance of regressed pathways were evaluated using the χ^2 difference test (Kline, 2005).

Measures

Political participation on Twitter and Facebook were each measured using a 7-item scale. Participants were provided a brief summary of the Limbaugh/Fluke

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Measures Used

	N	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Facebook participation	216	14.35[a]	6.08	.889
Twitter participation	211	11.47[a]	5.24	.923
Political information efficacy	216	3.65[b]	1.63	.915
Cynicism	216	4.60[b]	1.05	.898
External efficacy	216	4.46[b]	1.37	.921

Note: [a] = Sum of the seven items, scores range from 7–24.
[b] = Average of items on a 1–7 scale.

controversy[2] and a photograph of each of them presented side-by-side that had been common in the news coverage. After the summary they were asked to identify on a 4-point scale from *Very Unlikely* to *Very Likely* how probable it was that they personally did any of the following: for Facebook, saw information on their feed, read a link or watched a video, saw friends discussing the issue, posted a comment, "liked" a status, or posted a status about the controversy; for Twitter, saw information on their feed, followed a link, had friends or acquaintances tweet about it, re-Tweeted something, favorited a tweet, or personally tweeted about the controversy. Participants were also asked to identify how much attention they paid to the controversy both on Facebook and on Twitter, also on a 1-to-4 metric from *A lot of attention* to *No attention*.[3]

To assess whether individuals felt personally qualified to participate in politics (their confidence to engage) political information efficacy (PIE) was measured. PIE was developed by Kaid et al. (2007) to test a communication-centric type of information efficacy and has been successfully deployed in this context in subsequent research (e.g., Kaid, Fernandes, & Painter, 2011; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007; McKinney & Rill, 2009; Tedesco, 2011).[4] Cynicism was measured with 7 items relating to the trustworthiness of politicians.[5] External efficacy was measured with the 4-item political efficacy scale used by Kushin and Yamamoto (2010).[6] Descriptive statistics for all measures are presented in Table 1.

Results

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to establish a base model for comparison with the structural model and to determine model fit. Initial model fit for the CFA was below what would typically be desired. Inspection of the modification indexes suggested a pattern of correlated residual variance. Because essentially identical questions were asked about both Twitter activity and Facebook activity (e.g., did you "favorite a tweet" or "like a status"), these parallel questions

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Table 2
Latent Variable Correlations for the Measurement Model

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	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Facebook participation	1							
2. Twitter participation	.620	1						
3. Political information efficacy	.373	.335	1					
4. Cynicism	.055	−.047	.007	1				
5. External efficacy	.099	.059	.311	−.300	1			
6. Is a Democrat	−.008	−.057	.030	−.071	.089	1		
7. Is a Republican	−.063	.006	−.061	−.153	.167	−.577	1	
8. Is female	.031	−.006	−.264	−.147	.032	.009	.078	

shared item-level variance that confounded the initial model specification. Parallel items in the Facebook and Twitter measures were thus specified to correlate. This modification improved model fit to an appropriate level, χ^2 (402 $N = 216$) = 1112.92, $p < .01$, TLI/NNFI = 0.918, CFI = .929, RMSEA = .092 with a 90% confidence interval of .086–.099. All factor correlations in the measurement model are presented in Table 2.

Following the establishment of a well-fit measurement model, a structural model was specified to determine whether involvement in the social media conversation about Limbaugh's remarks could be explained by gender (RQ_1), political party affiliation (RQ_2), political information efficacy (H_1) cynicism (H_2), or external political efficacy (H_3). The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 1.

As can be seen in Figure 1, neither gender nor political party identification were significant predictors of the participation variables. In answer to RQ_1, female respondents were not more likely to discuss Limbaugh's controversial comments about women's reproductive rights than were men. Furthermore, in answer to RQ_2, Democrats were no more likely to read and participate in the social media firestorm than were Republicans or independents, as all three groups engaged equally. This was true both for participation on Facebook and Twitter.

Of the three hypotheses, only H_1 was supported. Respondents who were more confident that they possessed the information and ability to engage in political communication (H_1; PIE scale) were significantly more likely to participate in both Facebook and Twitter conversation about Limbaugh's remarks. However, people with low trust for politicians (H_2; cynicism scale) were no less likely to engage the social media conversation. Furthermore, people with more confidence in their ability to enact political change (H_3; external efficacy scale) were not more likely to speak out on either medium than were people with less belief.

Discussion

This study set out to examine a special case of media interconnectedness, one in which talk radio became the object of a political scandal driven by social media.

Figure 1
Prediction of social media participation. *< .05, **< .01, *< .001.**
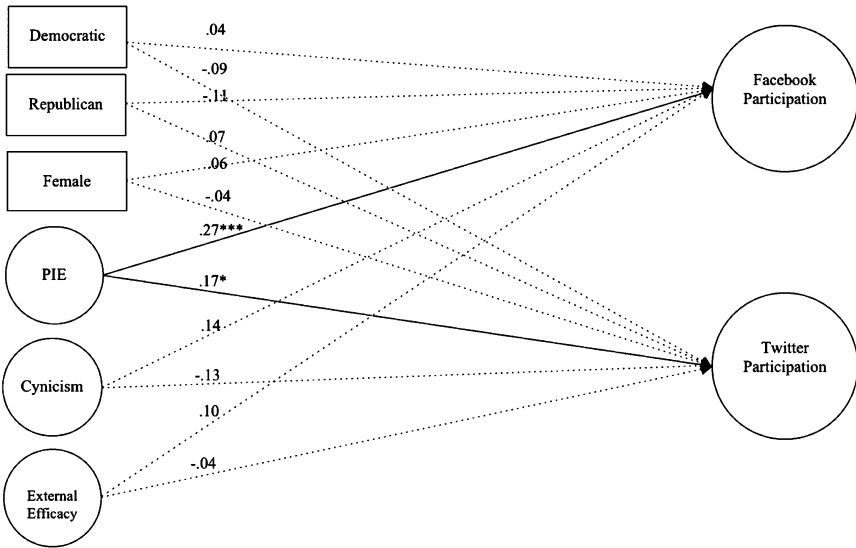
We sought to discover which characteristics were most associated with political talk on Facebook and Twitter about Limbaugh's incendiary statements. Specifically, we wanted to know whether women were more likely to participate in a controversy sparked by debate about women's reproductive rights and whether Democrats were more likely to enter the discussion than were Republicans or independents. We also hypothesized that those individuals who were confident that they had the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in politics would be more likely to engage this controversy through social media, while people who were generally cynical about the political process and did not believe their voice makes a difference would be less likely to participate. Our findings suggest that, in spite of the nature of the controversy, neither gender nor political party affiliation was significantly predictive of participation in the social media conversation. Nor did political cynicism or external efficacy matter in predicting which individuals would participate the most. Instead, only political information efficacy significantly predicted participation in the social media phenomenon surrounding the Limbaugh controversy. The implications of each of these findings will be discussed in the section that follows, as will the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

RQ$_1$ asked whether female respondents would be more likely to engage the conversation about the Limbaugh controversy on Facebook or Twitter. However, the sex of the respondent did not significantly predict participation in either social media. While young women have traditionally participated in politics at lower levels than men (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006), they may have been more highly engaged because this issue touched on women's health. Though young women tend to

participate at lower levels than their male counterparts, perhaps the nature of this controversy leveled the imbalance. Alternatively, because Limbaugh's comments ''went viral,'' perhaps a greater number of people participated at some level than would be the case for politics in general. If this were the case, the Limbaugh controversy represents a special case of greater overall participation. Our finding may also represent a change in participation rates between the sexes, perhaps women and men of the generation in our sample participate at more equal levels than those surveyed in past research. Finally, it may be the case that our finding is a feature of social media. In other words, past findings about women's engagement in politics are relative to various modes of participation. Social media may provide a lower threshold for participation and, as such, provide easier access for groups whose voices have typically been underrepresented in political discourse. The findings of this study do not provide conclusive evidence for any of these explanations but certainly provide a basis for future research on the subject.

RQ2 asked whether Democrats would be more likely to participate in the social media conversation about Limbaugh than would Republicans or independents. We speculated that they might because there is more political profit in the scandal for the Democratic Party. After all, this controversy erupted at a point in the election when Obama held a great lead over Romney among women and many pundits were discussing a Republican ''war on women'' (Weigel, 2012). We also speculated that members of either party would be more likely to engage in the social media debate than independents because of higher levels of political interest (Prior, 2007). In spite of this, our results suggest that individuals of any (or no) partisan identification were equally likely to engage the social media conversation. It is important to point out that our measure was not for participation in the media campaign that pressured advertisers to drop Limbaugh. It is almost certain that left and/or center leaning respondents would be more likely to have tweeted an advertiser than Republicans. Rather, our measure gauged the amount an individual followed and participated in the social media dialogue. It is reasonable that, given the salacious nature of Limbaugh's comments, interest was generated across the political spectrum. It is also likely that, as Democrats and liberals pilloried Limbaugh, Republicans and conservatives used social media in his defense (or to distance themselves from his comments). In any event, it was not the case that participation was significantly higher among either political party relative to the other or independents.

Finally, we hypothesized that those who were more confident in their own knowledge and ability to participate in politics (PIE), those who believed that the political process is responsive to citizen action (external political efficacy), and those who did not bear an especially cynical attitude toward politics would all be more likely to engage in the social media debate about the scandal. However, only PIE was a significant predictor of participation on either Facebook or Twitter, and it significantly predicted greater participation in both mediums. This is an important finding regarding young people's willingness to engage in political conversations. Past research shows that younger Americans are often the least interested (Kohut, 2012). However, socializing them to talk about politics is important for American

democracy (Delli Carpini et al., 2004). Because social media lowers the threshold for participation, younger Americans will have more opportunities to engage in political talk online. This may even spill over to traditional media—such as radio—that have been experiencing a decline in the digital age (Albarran, 2007). At a minimum, controversies like the Limbaugh-Fluke scandal make radio the object of political talk, if only for those confident enough to participate. Though this communication-centric internal efficacy appears to be a prerequisite to participation, social media may provide a bridge to radio, television, and newspapers and, by proxy, as a bridge to informed political debate.

Our findings suggest something important about the characteristics of those who are likely to utilize social media for its democratic potential. If people believe they know enough about politics and are capable of communicating their knowledge, they are more likely to participate using social media. This is true even if they hold a profound mistrust for politicians and the political system (cynicism). Furthermore, the effect is consistent whether a person believes her/his voice can make a difference or not (external efficacy). In other words, if we want young people to use Facebook and Twitter not just as a distraction, but also as an inroad into democratic participation, we should focus on cultivating the knowledge and skills necessary to make them comfortable, confident political conversationalists. Of our respondents, this confidence alone predicted greater political participation through social media.

The finding that PIE alone is a significant predictor of participation in conversation about the Limbaugh scandal has both theoretical and practical implications. For theory, this finding demonstrates the centrality of communication and information confidence for democratic engagement. PIE is designed to be a communication specific measure of efficacy because it emphasizes an individual's belief in her or his own communication skills and knowledge. Faith in the responsiveness of American democracy (external efficacy) and trust in politicians (cynicism) are both subject to external factors that an individual cannot easily change. As a practical matter, this finding emphasizes the value of cultivating the communication skills necessary to give young people confidence to participate in politics. Ideally, students who study political communication gain both the knowledge and the advocacy skills necessary to be effective democratic citizens. Our findings suggest that, when successful, this curriculum can increase participation in political conversation in the emerging social media environment and enrich democracy in the process.

Conclusion

We sought to determine which characteristics were most associated with high levels of participation in the social media discussion of Rush Limbaugh's controversial comments about Sandra Fluke. We found that, of those variables considered, only political information efficacy yielded greater participation. We surmise that young people need sufficient confidence in their knowledge of politics and their communication skills before they are highly likely to participate in a political controversy via

social media. This finding contributes theoretically in that it locates communication confidence at the center of a new generation of democratic citizens. Furthermore, our findings are in context of social media, an increasingly common medium for political participation. These findings are also of practical importance for educators, as many of us focus our curriculum on cultivating the knowledge and skills that students need to be effective participants in the democratic process.

In spite of these contributions, our study has important limitations. The sample for the study was undergraduate students at a Midwestern university. The participation habits of these students are certainly not generalizable to the broader American population. While it was not our aim to create a generalizable picture of the social media habits of America at large, it would certainly be a valuable endeavor for future research. Rather than generalize from such a unique population, we hope to establish an important insight into the political habits of young people when they engage through social media. Nevertheless, our sample was of college-going young people. Certainly not all young people attend college and those who do not are presumably less likely to participate in a Facebook or Twitter debate about Limbaugh. Furthermore, our sample was regionally bound. A similar sample in the Deep South may have yielded different results, as social conservatism is more pervasive. In the same vein, a sample from New England may have exhibited the characteristics of a more liberal population. It is unclear how this regional bias would implicate the relationships between the variables considered, but it is certainly worth pursuing similar studies in more diverse regions. Finally, because the data is cross-sectional, no causality can be established. We infer that PIE causes higher levels of participation because confidence in political communication competence is a construct that is likely more stable and less responsive to moments of controversy (like the Limbaugh story). Nevertheless, one can imagine that successful engagement in an online debate about the controversy actually increased the confidence of our participants.

In light of the above limitations, our results are presented as a preliminary profile of the type of young person who is likely to utilize social media for its political potential. Facebook is a relatively new and growing political phenomenon, and 2012 is the first presidential election in which Twitter will play a prominent role. This study is a first step toward answering some of the questions presented by the emergence of social media. The Limbaugh controversy provides an excellent case study for how social media interacts with traditional media such as radio. We capitalized on this case study to begin filling in details about the of role social media in encouraging political talk. Future research should apply these findings to other contexts. While the Limbaugh controversy was an ideal starting point, as it blends old and new media and represents an early victory for the power of social media to exert pressure on political elites, it is also a unique case that may not translate well to other contexts. Future research should also seek to replicate these findings in more representative samples and with alternative research designs that introduce either experimental or longitudinal features to better infer causality, namely whether information efficacy causes people to engage in social media conversation or whether social media engagement increases information efficacy.

Finally, future research should further explore the connections between social media and traditional media such as radio. Certainly, there is much about this relationship that our study left unexplored. Was it the archival and integrated nature of the Internet (e.g., the ability to instantly capture and share video of Limbaugh making his comments) that caused the event to spread so quickly? Does this controversy provide a template for a new type of political consumerism? These are important questions left unanswered by our research. We are merely scratching the surface of potential academic insights about the relationship between radio and social media. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that whatever the complexities of this multi-media relationship, it is primarily a communication phenomenon. The cultivation of media and political literacy as well as advocacy skills is directly linked to political engagement. If our hope is for emerging technology to be an asset to contemporary citizenship, it is in these areas that we are most valuable.

Notes

[1] The complete list of sources was: Online News, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Cable News, Network News, Sunday Morning News, Newspapers, Entertainment News, and Radio.

[2] The summary read: ''The Rush Limbaugh – Sandra Fluke controversy began when Limbaugh, a conservative talk-show host, commented on Fluke's Congressional testimony calling for mandated insurance coverage of contraceptives. Limbaugh referred to Fluke, a Georgetown University law student, as a 'slut' and 'prostitute' who required insurance coverage for contraceptives because of her frequent sexual encounters. Many political figures and media outlets called Limbaugh's words inappropriate, which coincided with Limbaugh's show losing several national advertisers.''

[3] The two attention items were reverse-coded.

[4] Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 1–7 scale: I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics; If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for; I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.

[5] Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 1–7 scale: Politicians are more interested in power than in what the people think; Politicians are corrupt; Politicians cannot be trusted; Politicians are too greedy; Politicians always tell the public what they want to hear instead of what they actually plan to do; Politicians are dishonest; Politicians are more concerned about power than advocating for citizens.

[6] Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 1–7 scale: My vote makes a difference; I have a real say in what the government does; I can make a difference if I participate in the election process; Voting gives people an effective way to influence what the government does.

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