Research Article

Can Social Media Change Your Mind? SNS Use, Cross-cutting Exposure and Discussion, and Political View Change

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Abstract: The present study proposes a multiple-mediation model in which the use of social-networking sites (SNS) or social media, is significantly related to political view change and issue involvement through users’ information-seeking motivations, cross-cutting exposure, and cross-cutting discussion. Analysis of national data (N = 684) indicates that the frequent use of SNS has significant positive effects on both view change and issue involvement through users’ political information-seeking motivations and willing discussion across lines of difference by actively expressing their views on others’ posts they disagree with. According to the proposed model, frequent SNS use has no significant influence on view change or issue involvement when the user does not use the media for information-seeking or cross-cutting discussion. These findings demonstrate that informational use and participation in dangerous (i.e., heterogeneous) political discussion are necessary conditions of such meaningful consequences for democracy as political view change and issue involvement.

Keywords: Social networking site, social media, cross-cutting, political discussion, information-seeking motivations, disagreement

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1. Introduction

Democratic theory has long posited that political discussion among citizens with differing views is vital in healthy democratic society. It is claimed that discussion allows citizens to air their disagreements; have opportunities to reconsider initial, unreflective impulses; and fosters understanding of alternative perspectives and viewpoints (Arendt, 1958; Habermas, 1962/1989; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). According to Price (2006), “people” grow as “citizens” by engaging in discursive politics (p.3).

Since social networking sites (SNS), or social media, have become popular platforms through which people share information and communicate with one another. According to recent reports, a little more than six in ten millennials (61%) report getting political news on Facebook in a given week (Pew Research, 2015). About one-third of Facebook users (32%) say they post about government and politics on Facebook, and 28% comment on these types of posts (Pew Research, 2015). With the increasing political uses of SNS, SNS’ potential to promote citizens’ political and civic engagement have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (e.g., Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). However, relatively little effort has been extended to addressing the underlying mechanisms through which SNS can bring such outcomes. In particular, the role of SNS as a digital space where users with differing views deliberate over political issues has been largely
overlooked: Does frequent SNS use lead to frequent discussions with dissimilar others? Can SNS discussions actually change users’ political opinions and involvement? These are questions that need to be addressed relative to the potential of current digital media environments. Given the increasing integration of SNS into modern life, it is important to examine the effects of SNS on political discussion – and whether the use of SNS is largely beneficial to democracy.

Via analysis of Pew Research Center’s national survey data collected in the U.S. in 2012, the present study proposes a model to test whether SNS use predicts political view change and increased issue involvement through the mechanisms of information-seeking motivations, cross-cutting exposure (i.e., exposure to political views that is differing from one’s own), and cross-cutting discussion (i.e., discussion with people with differing views on political issues). Our serial mediation model (Figure 1) aims to identify the ways in which SNS are likely to play beneficial roles for democracy: whether it spurs political information-seeking motivations, cross-cutting exposure, and cross-cutting discussion, and whether those translate into political view change or increased issue involvement.

2. Literature Review

Studies have found that active SNS use predicts extension of grassroots movements (Schulz, 2008) and increases in civic engagement both online and offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014), and higher levels of social capital – particularly bridging social capital which allows individuals to manage a wider network of weak ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These extended networks of weak ties are a potential reason SNS can lead to exposure to diverse opinions and subsequent changes in political views.

Expressing one’s opinion through social media, in particular, is a strong predictor of overall political involvement (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). According to Pew’s report (2012) on the data we utilize in this paper, a quarter (25%) of SNS users have become more involved in a political issue after discussing it or reading posts about it on SNS, and 16% of SNS users have changed their views about a political issue as a result of exposure to political content or discussion on SNS. These findings imply that SNS use can have a profound influence on individuals’ political views, attitudes, and behaviors. We propose that SNS use is related to increased information-seeking motivations, increased cross-cutting exposure, increased cross-cutting discussion, view change, and issue involvement both directly and indirectly via a serial mediation path (see Figure 1).

A framework that is useful in studies that link SNS to social capital or political participation is uses and gratifications (e.g., Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2010; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009). The uses and gratification perspective is an audience-centered approach to understand specific needs and gratifications individuals satisfy by using mass media on the assumption that individuals are goal-oriented active consumers (Severin & Tankard, 1997). Information-seeking motivations are one aspect of uses and gratifications that are particularly relevant to political use of SNS; individuals need to keep up with information in order to know about public issues, decide their stance on the issues, or figure out how to involve in political actions, and they tend to pay more attention to political information that is shared or mentioned by people they know to prepare themselves for possible discussion (Eveland, 2004). According to studies that examined SNS with uses and gratification perspectives, expressing and sharing information is one of the main motivations users seek (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2010). Thus, as SNS users increasingly post political opinions or discussion topics (Pew Research, 2014), we propose that SNS use is likely to increase motivations for political information-seeking in order to discuss these public issues both on- and off-line.

In turn, increased information-seeking motivations have the potential to lead to increased cross-cutting exposure and discussion on SNS. Brundidge (2010) proposes that Internet users who have information-seeking motivations tend to enjoy the most benefits of the digital public sphere – such as inadvertently running into differing views – as long as they are not too rigid in their information selection. Furthermore, information acquisition is one of the essential needs sought by media use (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982; Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). According to the classic media effect model, media consumption is triggered by informational motivations, and often fuels discussion, which shapes opinion, and then opinion triggers action (Bryce, 1888/1973; Katz, 1992; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). Given that information-seeking motivations include desires to hear from many points of view, we propose that information-seeking motivations will be positively related to cross-cutting political exposure and discussion, resulting in a positive indirect effect from SNS use to cross-cutting political exposure and discussion.

Additionally, SNS use likely leads directly to increased cross-cutting political exposure and discussion; the enormous reach and penetration of SNS translates into huge potential
for interaction between individuals of differing political views – including ideas and opinions underrepresented in traditional news media (Kushin & Ktchener, 2009). The default settings of SNS allow any user to post his/her opinion or to comment on others’ posts with no intervention of traditional gatekeepers, and those posts can be easily shared and responded by a number of people. Because the primary purpose of SNS is keeping up with family and friends, SNS users are less likely to choose their friends or followers mainly based on political preferences. Rather, their social networks are likely to be a mix of what Granovetter (1973) called “strong ties” and “weak ties,” that make the networks heterogeneous. Thus, increased use of SNS likely increases the probability of cross-cutting political exposure. Furthermore, cross-cutting political discussion is most likely to take place where politics are not the main purpose but come up only incidentally in conversations such as online fan and hobby groups rather than explicitly political groups (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009); thus, SNS use is likely additionally associated with cross-cutting political discussion, both directly through these incidental social interactions on SNS, and indirectly through increased exposure to dissonant political views.

Deliberation theorists (e.g., Habermas, 1989; Fishkin, 1991) claim that having discussions with dissimilar others benefits individuals and society at large. While it can also bring opinion polarization or ambivalence (Mutz, 2002b), heterogeneous discussion networks are positively related to knowledge gain (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard & Nisbet, 2004), accuracy in perception of the climate of opinion (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995), ideology distinction (Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz, 2008), reasoned opinion formation (Eliasoph, 1998; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004), perspective taking (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005), tolerance (Moy & Gastil, 2006; Mutz, 2002a), and political participation (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Kwak et al., 2005; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele et al., 2004). These studies suggest that having political discourse across lines of difference is an essential form of communication in a pluralistic society (Mutz & Martin, 2001).

Mere exposure to differing views (cross-cutting exposure) without active engagement also has pro civic consequences. However, given that listening to someone else’s view without active feedback is a unilateral, one-way communication rather than a true exchange of ideas, cross-cutting exposure alone is a passive form of communication at best. It is the message receiver’s expression of thoughts and subsequent conversation that turn what could be the message sender’s monologue (talking to others) into discussion (talking with others). Voicing opinions toward a person with a differing view is important not only because it keeps discussion going, but also because it is an expression of one’s thoughts. Well documented is the positive impact of expression (vs. no expression) on information processing and learning (e.g., Eveland & McLeod, 1995; Eveland, 2004; Pingree, 2007), working memory capacity (Klein & Boals, 2001), and civic participation (e.g., Shah et al., 2005). Further, Price, Nir, & Cappella (2006) found that the positive effects of news exposure on opinion formation were entirely mediated by one’s own expression. Gil de Zúñiga and his colleagues (2014) found that informational uses of social media have an indirect effect on political engagement through political expression. Give-and-take dialogue is the essence of discussion, and discussion is likely to maximize its potential when participants with dissimilar views engage in free trade of opinions in a civil way.

As a result of engaging in a heterogeneous political discussion, individuals might be persuaded by their discussion partner and eventually modify their views, they might influence their partner and become more convinced about their own view, or they might stay ambivalent. In any case, they are likely to become more informed about and involved in the issue because of the expression effect (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Pingree, 2007). Changing a political view rarely occurs, and having heterogeneous discussion is extremely valuable because it opens up a door to political view change. Increased issue involvement is also a meaningful consequence of political discussion which can result in further participatory behaviors (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). Given this review of the literature, we propose that cross-cutting exposure and discussion have positive effects on issue involvement and opinion change. Furthermore, given the links discussed above, we anticipate that SNS use, overall, will increase the likelihood of opinion change and issue involvement (see Figure 1).

3. Method

3.1. Sample

To test the proposed model, Pew Research Center’s national survey data collected in 2012 as part of its Internet & American Life Project is used. Telephone interviews were conducted in English and Spanish via landline and cellular phone random digit dialing between January and February, 2012. Among the sample, only those who answered that they had been exposed to a political
opinion they did not agree with on those sites at least one time received the question regarding cross-cutting political discussion on SNS and were thus included in the analysis \((N = 684)\). As is typical in survey research, there was sporadic missing data on the items we included in our analyses. While no variable was missing on more than 2% of cases, cumulatively, listwise deletion would result in a loss of 13% of cases. Hotdeck imputation has been shown to be a valid and useful way to handle missing data (Myers, 2011), thus we imputed missing values across all variables utilizing hotdeck imputation, assigning values from randomly selected participants of the same sex and level of education.

3.2. Outcome Variables
To examine the role of SNS use in democracy, this study focuses on two potential outcomes of cross-cutting discussion: political view change and issue involvement.

3.2.1. View change
Respondents were asked: “Thinking about how using social networks might affect your political views overall, have you, personally, ever changed your views about a political issue AFTER discussing it or reading posts about it on a social networking site?” \((\text{Yes} = 1, \text{No} = 0)\). A majority said “no,” but 17% reported that they had changed their views as a function of cross-cutting exposure or discussion on SNS. View change was modeled, therefore, as a dichotomous outcome variable with logistic regression.

3.2.2. Issue involvement
Respondents were asked: “Thinking about how using social networks might affect your political views overall, have you, personally, ever become more active or involved in a political issue AFTER discussing it or reading posts about it on a social networking site?” \((\text{Yes} = 1, \text{No} = 0)\). Three quarters (74.5%) of respondents said “no,” but 25.5% reported that they had become more involved in an issue as a function of cross-cutting exposure or discussion on SNS. Issue involvement was modeled as a dichotomous outcome variable with logistic regression.

3.3. Independent Variable
3.3.1. SNS use
To assess how frequently respondents use SNS, they were asked to rate how often, if ever, they visited social networking sites including Twitter on a 6-point scale (6: Several times a day (39.3% of respondents), 5: About once a day (25.6%), 4: 3 to 5 days a week (13.7%), 3: 1 to 2 days a week (11.8%), 2: Every few weeks (5.3%), 1: Less often (4.2%)).

3.4. Mediators
3.4.1. Information-seeking motivations
Respondents were asked to rate on a 4-point scale how important SNS were to them personally when it comes to keeping up with political news (1: Not at all important – 4: Very important). On average, seeking information was not too important for respondents, \(M=2.09, SD=1.08\). Information seeking motivations were modeled with OLS regression.

3.4.2. Cross-cutting exposure
Respondents were asked how often they disagreed with the political opinions or political content their friends post on SNS (1: Never, 2: Only sometimes, 3: Most of the time, 4: Always or almost always). As described above, those participants who “never” disagree with political opinions were excluded from analysis, as they were not asked the follow-up question about cross-cutting discussion. The most frequent response was “only sometimes” (81.6%), followed by “most of the time” (12.1%), and “always” (6.3%). Cross-cutting exposure was modeled as an ordered categorical variable using ordinal logistic regression.

3.4.3. Cross-cutting discussion
Respondents were asked how they usually responded when one of their friends posted something about politics that they disagreed with (“Ignore the post” = 1 (67.5%), “It depends” = 2 (5.4%),
“Respond to it by posting a comment or posting something of your own” = 3 (27%).) Given the low incidence of the response “it depends,” and that such a response indicates some cross-cutting discussion, we recoded the variable as not reacting (67.5%) or discussing (32.5%; which included both the “It depends” and “Respond...” options). Cross-cutting discussion was modeled as a dichotomous outcome variable with logistic regression.

3.5. Control Variables

3.5.1. Offline political talk

To rule out the counter-explanation that participants who enjoy discussing politics may simply utilize SNS more, we include a measure of offline political talk. Respondents were asked to rate how often they talked about politics or current events with their family and friends on a 4-point scale (1: Never, 4: Very often). The average respondent reported that they “Sometimes” had interpersonal political discussions ($M=2.97, SD=.97$).

3.5.2. Partisanship

Robust evidence of selective exposure is found from strong partisans (Graber, 1984; Stroud, 2008), thus it is important to control for the effect that partisanship may have. Those who identified themselves as either Republicans or Democrats were coded as partisans (1) whereas Independents and those who chose other answers (“No preference” “Other party”) were coded as non-partisans (0). Slightly more than a half (54%) reported they were affiliated with one of the two parties.

3.5.3. Conflict avoidance

One of the main social psychological reasons why people avoid openly expressing their disagreement is their concern about causing conflicts and hurting interpersonal relationships. Those who tend to avoid conflicts are less likely to publicly confront others, taking sides in the face of multiple competing constituencies, or participate in political actions (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Mutz, 2002b). To control individual propensity of conflict avoidance, we utilized a question inquiring whether respondents had ever decided not to post a political comment or link on SNS because they were concerned that it might upset or offend someone. The response was dichotomous (Yes = 1, No = 0). Most respondents (77.7%) reported that they were not discouraged by the concerns when posting political content.

3.5.4. SNS friends’ political interest

The extent to which one’s SNS friends are interested in politics can influence on his or her political view and involvement on SNS and, thus, needs to be controlled for. Respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how much of what their friends share and post on SNS is related to politics, political issues or the 2012 elections (1: None at all – 5: All or almost all of it). The average response was between “Just a little” and “Some,” closer to the former ($M=2.31, SD=.97$).

3.5.5. Demographics

Measures of respondents’ sex, age, race, and education were included in the analysis. The ratio of men to women was near 1:1, with slightly more women (51%). Respondents’ ages were distributed from “18” to “97 or older” ($M=46.36, SD=18.26$). To categorize race, respondents who identified themselves as Hispanics (13.9%) were asked to identify as either White Hispanics or Black Hispanics and recategorized as either Whites or Blacks. Whites were the majority (75.6%) followed by African-Americans (13.9%) and Asian or Pacific Islanders (3.2%). These categories were recoded as a dichotomous variable (1: Whites, 0: Non-whites). Education was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (None or grades 1-8) to 7 (Post-graduate training/professional school after college). The average respondent indicated they attended technical, trade, or vocational school after high school (4), but not college (5) ($M=4.30, SD=1.71$).

4. Results

To explore the extent to which SNS use contributes to political view change and issue involvement, multiple tests of direct and indirect effects were conducted utilizing Mplus. The proposed serial mediation model hypothesizes that significant effects of SNS use on view change or issue involvement are mediated by information-seeking motivations, cross-cutting exposure,
and cross-cutting discussion in sequence as depicted in Figure 1. All coefficients reported are unstandardized.

Looking first at the outcome of information-seeking motivations, SNS use was significantly and positively related to information-seeking motivations (b = .157, p < .001). When predicting cross-cutting exposure, there was no significant total effect of SNS use on cross-cutting exposure (total effect = .030, p = .517); which can be decomposed into a non-significant direct path from SNS use to cross-cutting exposure (b = .052, p = .274) and a negative indirect relationship from SNS use to cross-cutting exposure through information-seeking motivations (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD} = -.022, p < .05). This negative indirect relationship is due to a negative relationship between information-seeking motivations and cross-cutting exposure (b = -.139, p < .05).

Turning next to the outcome of cross-cutting discussion, there was a positive and significant total effect of SNS use on cross-cutting discussion (total effect = .136, p < .001), comprised of a positive and significant direct effect (b = .088, p < .05) and a positive and significant total indirect effect (total indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD} = .048, p < .001). This total indirect effect is composed of a positive and significant indirect effect from SNS use to information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting discussion (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD} = .044, p < .001), and non-significant effects from SNS use to information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD} = -.003, p = .192) and from SNS use to cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD} = .007, p = .391).

Information-seeking motivations had a positive and significant total effect on cross-cutting discussion (total effect = .259, p < .001), comprised of a positive a significant direct effect (b = .279, p < .001) and a negative, but non-significant indirect effect from information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion (indirect effect\textsubscript{IS → CCD} = -.020, p = .169). Cross-cutting exposure, in turn, had a positive and marginally significant effect on cross-cutting discussion (b = .141, p < .10).

Finally, looking at the ultimate outcome variables, SNS use had a positive and significant total effect on both view change (total effect = .083, p < .10) and issue involvement (total effect = .105, p < .05).

The total effect of SNS use on view change was composed of a non-significant direct effect (b = .001, p = .980), but a positive and significant total indirect effect (total indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → VC} = .084, p < .001). The total indirect effect was composed of seven specific indirect effects, the indirect path from SNS use to view change through: (1) information-seeking motivations was positive and significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → VC} = .048, p < .001), (2) information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting exposure was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD → VC} = .000, p = .832), (3) information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting discussion was positive and significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD → CCD → VC} = .012, p < .05), (4) information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD → CCD} = .257), (5) cross-cutting exposure was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD → CCD} = -.001, p < .001), (6) cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD → CCD} = .002, p = .437), (7) cross-cutting discussion was positive and approached significance (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD} = .024, p = .101). In sum, any indirect effect including a path to or from cross-cutting exposure was not significant; almost all other indirect effects from SNS use to attitude change were positive and significant (the exception was path #7, from SNS use to cross-cutting discussion to attitude change, which approached significance).

The pattern of effects from SNS use to issue involvement was identical to those for view change. The significant total effect of SNS use on issue involvement (total effect = .105, p < .05) was composed of a non-significant direct effect (b = .030, p = .485), but a positive and significant total indirect effect (total indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → II} = .075, p < .001). The total indirect effect was composed of seven specific indirect effects, the indirect path from SNS use to issue involvement through: (1) information-seeking motivations was positive and significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → II} = .037, p < .01), (2) information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting exposure was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD} = .002, p = .390), (3) information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting discussion was positive and significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD → II} = .013, p < .01), (4) information-seeking motivations to cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → IS → CCD → CCD} = -.001, p = .251), (5) cross-cutting exposure was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD} = .005, p = .518), (6) cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion was non-significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD → II} = .002, p = .439), (7) cross-cutting discussion was positive and marginally significant (indirect effect\textsubscript{SNS → CCD} = .027, p < .10). In sum, any indirect effect including a path to or from cross-cutting exposure was not significant; all other indirect effects from SNS use to issue involvement were positive and significant.

92

Social Media Studies 2016; 2(2): 87-97
Turning next to the relationship between information-seeking motivations and these two outcomes, results demonstrate that the total effect is positive and significant in predicting both view change \((\text{total effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{VC}} = .378, p < .001)\) and issue involvement \((\text{total effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{II}} = .328, p < .001)\).

The total effect of information-seeking motivations on view change was composed of a positive and significant direct effect \((b = .305, p < .001)\) and a positive and significant total indirect effect \((\text{total indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{VC}} = .073, p < .05)\). The total indirect effect was composed of three specific indirect effects, the indirect path from information-seeking motivations to view change through: (1) cross-cutting exposure was non-significant \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{VC}} = .003, p = .829)\), (2) cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion was non-significant \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{CCD} \rightarrow \text{VC}} = -.005, p = .236)\), (3) cross-cutting discussion was positive and significant \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{CCD} \rightarrow \text{VC}} = .075, p < .05)\). As with SNS use, both indirect effects including a path to or from cross-cutting exposure were non-significant; thus, the significant total indirect effect is carried from information-seeking motivations to view change through cross-cutting discussion.

The pattern of results for the effect of information-seeking motivations on issue involvement was the same as for view change. The significant total effect of information-seeking motivations on issue involvement \((\text{total effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{II}} = .328, p < .001)\) was composed of a positive and significant direct effect \((b = .237, p < .001)\) and a positive and significant total indirect effect \((\text{total indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{II}} = .091, p < .01)\). The total indirect effect was composed of three specific indirect effects, the indirect path from information-seeking motivations to issue involvement through: (1) cross-cutting exposure was non-significant \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{II}} = .013, p = .378)\), (2) cross-cutting exposure to cross-cutting discussion was non-significant \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{CCD} \rightarrow \text{II}} = -.006, p = .230)\), (3) cross-cutting discussion was positive and significant \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{IS} \rightarrow \text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{CCD} \rightarrow \text{II}} = .085, p < .01)\). As above, both indirect effects including a path to or from cross-cutting exposure were non-significant; thus, the significant total indirect effect is carried from information-seeking motivations to issue involvement through cross-cutting discussion.

The total effects of cross-cutting exposure on both view change \((\text{total effect}_{\text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{VC}} = .18, p = .829)\) and issue involvement \((\text{total effect}_{\text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{II}} = .048, p = .545)\) were non-significant. The effect of cross-cutting exposure on view change was composed of a non-significant direct effect \((b = .021, p = .807)\) and a non-significant indirect effect through cross-cutting discussion \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{CCD} \rightarrow \text{VC}} = .038, p = .125)\). Similarly, the effect of cross-cutting exposure on issue involvement was composed of a non-significant direct effect \((b = -.091, p = .261)\) and a non-significant indirect effect through cross-cutting discussion \((\text{indirect effect}_{\text{CCE} \rightarrow \text{CCD} \rightarrow \text{II}} = .043, p = .120)\).

Finally, cross-cutting discussion had a positive and significant relationship with both view change \((b = .271, p < .001)\) and issue involvement \((b = .303, p < .001)\).

In total, this set of predictors (including the control variables) explained 21% of variance in information seeking, 6% of variance in cross-cutting exposure, 26% of variance in cross-cutting discussion, 24% of variance in view change, and 26% of variance in issue involvement.

5. Discussion
This study aims to delineate the mechanisms through which SNS might translate into view change and issue involvement. The results demonstrate the relative importance of information-seeking motivations and cross-cutting discussion as mediators of SNS use; the positive effects of SNS use on view change and issue involvement are significant only when mediated through political information-seeking motivations and cross-cutting discussion.

The two mediators of information-seeking motivations and cross-cutting discussion are therefore important predictors when modeling the effect of SNS use on view change and issue involvement. Even when a person has no particular political information-seeking motivations, if the person stumbles into a cross-cutting political discussion while using SNS, he or she has a high possibility of experiencing political view change or increased issue involvement. Likewise, even without cross-cutting discussion, if an SNS user is motivated for information, he or she is likely to experience political view change or issue involvement.

Notably, information-seeking motivations was a positive predictor of cross-cutting discussion, but a negative predictor of cross-cutting exposure. This finding indicates that those who utilize SNS for political information are actually less exposed to diverse views. The most plausible psychological mechanism to explain this counter-intuitive finding may be selective exposure; it might be that those who closely follow political news via SNS tend to seek consonant information by following or leading like-minded people or news sources they prefer. This suggests the possibility of SNS functions as homogeneous “echo chambers” where diverse views are hard
to find as a result of political fragmentation. However, even for these consonant information-seekers, engaging in cross-cutting political discussion has a strong deliberation effect such that they are significantly more likely to change their original views and get more involved in the issue of discussion than those who are not engaged in cross-cutting discussion.

While cross-cutting exposure significantly increases the likelihood of engaging in cross-cutting discussion, neither view change nor issue involvement are directly predicted by cross-cutting exposure (although they are indirectly influenced by cross-cutting exposure through cross-cutting discussion). This finding indicates that “hearing the other side” leads to changes in one’s political view or behavior only when it is followed by cross-cutting discussion. People who are exposed to differing views but stay silent may remain ambivalent (Mutz, 2002b) rather than actively contemplating the views and taking a stance. When people actually raise their voices by honestly commenting on the posts with which they disagree, they seem to become more involved in the issue and can actually change their own view.

Finally, the model demonstrates a significant relationship between SNS use and cross-cutting discussion. Whereas concerns have been raised regarding the potential for SNS usage to displace other valuable civic or political activities, in fact, frequent SNS users seem to have more opportunities to enjoy the benefits of the digital public sphere. Although the indirect effects of SNS use on view change and issue involvement after passing three mediators are small, they are meaningful given how difficult to change someone’s political view. Also, the finding that SNS use significantly influences cross-cutting discussion raises hope for the democratic potential of ever-popular new media outlets.

Being a secondary analysis of existing survey data, the present study is not without limitation. Principally, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes testing for causality. For instance, other directions of causality are plausible; it is possible that those who changed their political view after a SNS discussion are more likely to engage in another cross-cutting discussion and try to expose themselves to diverse views, which eventually encourages them to use SNS more frequently. Longitudinal studies are encouraged to examine causal relationships. Also, measures are not ideal. Most measures are single-question items with minimal response options, and key variables such as view change were measured based on self-reports. The cross-cutting exposure was measured by the question of how often respondents disagreed with the political opinions or political content their friends posted on SNS. Answering “always” could mean having only one friend who always posted political content they disagreed with while 99% of their friends had the same views as the respondent. It could have been worded more clearly or asked in two separate questions to avoid confusion. Future research, which employs more fine-tuned measurement, would greatly add to this area of study.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to adding insights into the understudied area of social media discussion. The question of whether a medium has a potential to function as public sphere is less important than the question of when and how its users actually take advantage of such potential. In that sense, it is important to shed light on the context in which SNS users experience view change about or more involvement in an issue. While the positive role of information-seeking motivations as a driving force toward cross-cutting discussion and better-reasoned opinion resonates with the uses and gratifications perspective, its negative effects on cross-cutting exposure demonstrates that the motivations can also facilitate selective exposure. Although information has been identified as a goal of SNS use in some studies, this study shows that frequent SNS use actually increase motivations for political information-seeking.

Given the wide variety of features of online media and the fast pace of change, it may not be feasible to offer a single yes or no answer to the question whether SNS, or any new media, enhance or hamper democratic outcomes. Whatever positive or negative effects that might be, the effects must be examined in the context of the specific purpose and individual motivations. Overall, what users take away from a medium is determined by what they use the medium for, rather than solely what the medium itself can offer. Whereas some citizens utilize any medium for the purpose of political information and discussion, others will hardly engage in political activities regardless of medium. What we can do, as communication scholars, is to ask under what conditions citizens are likely to utilize media in ways that promote democracy. For SNS, the answer seems to lie in users’ political information-seeking motivations and cross-cutting discussion. With Internet users increasingly obtaining political information through SNS, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms that may lead to active political discussions and subsequent changes in view and involvement. Given that free expression of opinions across the line of differences is the hallmark of democracy, future studies are encouraged to continue to examine the context where social media users participate in the cross-cutting discussion.
References


Figure 1. The proposed model of the effects of SNS use on political view change or involvement through information-seeking motivations, cross-cutting exposure, and cross-cutting discussion.

Figure 2. Results from a model of the effects of SNS use on political view change, or issue involvement, through information-seeking motivations, cross-cutting exposure, and cross-cutting discussion.

Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients from a structural equation model. Also modeled, but not shown for visual clarity, were controls of age, sex, education, race, partisanship, offline political talk, conflict avoidance, and political interest of SNS friends.