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New Media and Politics: A Synopsis of Theories, Issues, and Research

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Summary and Keywords

The ongoing revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs) has fundamentally transformed the landscape of democracy and the way people engage in politics. From the configuration of media systems to the decision-making of the voting public, the changes have permeated through almost every level of society, affecting political institutions, political actors, citizen groups, and mass media. For each aspect, a synopsis of classical and emergent political communication theories, contemporary and contentious political issues, and cutting-edge research adds to the discussion of new media. The discussion is unfolded with an account of research of new media effects on politics in international setting and cross-cultural contexts with insights of how Western theories and research apply (or fail to) in international contexts.

Keywords: ICTs, new media, politics, political communication, mediatization, democracy, media effects, fake news, electoral politics, political activism

Introduction: Defining New Media and Politics

The meanings of “new media” and “politics” have constantly changed in the last decades thanks to the ongoing revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs give rise to an increasingly wider range of new channels, platforms, contents, services, applications, and institutions that are digital, interactive, and accessible 24/7. New and emerging media such as blogging, social media, long-term evolution (LTE) mobile devices, and micro-messaging apps are not only drastically transforming the media landscape of political communication but also serving as catalysts contributing to the evolving dynamics of politics, influencing how political actors communicate, how political content and discourse are created and distributed, and how political decisions are made (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2009; Perloff, 2013). Therefore, the inquiry into the interplay between new media and politics calls for attention to how well-established theoretical perspectives adapt the logic of new media. At the same time, the inquiry should also include

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an account of contentious issues in politics and phenomena in contemporary contexts (e.g., the debate on “fake news”). In fact, the disjunction between normative conceptions and social conditions may better delineate the current contour of political communication in the digital era, forcing scholars to rethink many of the theories and assumptions developed from or grounded in legacy media systems.

Ironically, the concept of “new media” is not necessarily new. As a term that continues to be in a state of constant evolution, the newness of “new media” has been relative rather than definite (Enli, 2017). According to Google Ngram, which comprehensively examines the word use in history, there have been three noticeable frequency peaks of using the term of “new media” in the corpus of English publications. The three peaks occurred after the popularization of television (1960s), the Internet (1990s), and mobile technologies (2000s and onward), respectively. Regardless of the specific ICT, the interest in new media at each peak seems to be deeply rooted in the belief in their transformative power that is not possessed by the old and well-institutionalized media systems in the prior period (Castells, 2007). Not surprisingly, when emerging on the ICT scene, these media are conveniently labeled “new” because they deliver new promises to the public, challenging the existing norms while providing new possibilities for social change.

Following this line of conception, the term “new media” in this article refers to the non-institutionalized or weakly institutionalized media platforms and user-generated content on these platforms that possess great capacities to influence the current power relations and dynamics of politics. This broad definition incorporates both the “hardware” (e.g., infrastructure and technological functions) and the “software” (e.g., interface, messages, and interactions) aspects of new media, allowing for a more holistic view of the functionality and social aspects of new media. As a result, it will not only facilitate examining a variety of new media forms, such as the Internet, social media, and mobile technologies, but it will also help extract the commonality shared by these new media of various kinds of structure and content creation.

On the other hand, as a multifaceted and multilevel concept, politics entails rich practice. It involves a myriad of political actors, such as politicians, political organizations, and activists, and various types of political discourse and media coverage, as well as their direct and indirect influences on voters and other targeted audience. The symbiotic relationship between media and politics is so strong that it would be almost impossible to define politics without media in contemporary societies. As Enli (2017) argued, media and politics have often been viewed as inseparable, and they exert constant influence on each another.

Drawing on the theories of mediation (a framework to analyze the roles media technologies play in the process of communication, see Altheide & Snow, 1988) and mediatization (see Livingstone, 2009, for a review), which argues that media play a critical role in structuring political communication processes (e.g., Hepp, 2013; Hjavard, 2013; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). A rich stream of research has examined how new ICTs are extending human communication beyond the physical limits while obliging political actors to accom-

moderate to the unique logic of media, both legacy and new. As Livingstone (2009) pointed out, new media have become a critical co-constitutive for many social and political institutions in media-saturated societies. Therefore, political and social events are often transformed and optimized into formats suitable for new media representation, bringing about a variety of social and cultural consequences following new media exposure and use (Couldry, 2008). For instance, a phone video of a police shooting can go viral on social media, causing social uproar and street protests. Hence, this article rests on the thesis that the proliferation of new media, which are ubiquitous in mediatized societies around the world, has reinvigorated debates about the positive and harmful impacts of media on politics. The discussion is presented in examining the political actors first, then content, followed by effects of new media in political communication, with particular attention to the consequences and processes of new media effects on social and political changes in contemporary societies and in international contexts.

New Media and Political Actors

The Internet has fundamentally changed the way people acquire political information and engage in political activities, undercutting the century-old notion that politics is only the politicians' business usually conducted behind closed doors. With numerous new media platforms functioning as political arenas (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Mobile Messaging Service), politicians and political organizations can reach, and possibly influence, mass audiences directly. As Castells (2007) notes, the rapid-evolving new media have ushered in the era of "mass self-communication" characterized by individuals' ability of generating and disseminating content to global audiences. As the primary enablers of mass self-communication, digital networks (the Internet) and micro-electronics (smartphones) in general, and social media in particular, produce unprecedented and ubiquitous interconnectedness and interdependencies among a wide array of political actors and the public (Ling, 2004). In fact, new media not only have become important loci where electoral politics is communicated, they have also become functional tools to promote (or impede) social and political reform.

Politicians and Electoral Politics

In democratic countries, the candidates' effort in using a variety of social media platforms to disseminate campaigning messages to voters has changed fundamentally how politicians reach out to voters. Research has shown that the influence of social media on election campaigns worldwide is profound (e.g., see Enli, 2017; Hong & Nadler, 2012; Larsson & Moe, 2012). An important observation is that social media have "gone mainstream," bypassing traditional mass media outlets and have become the major spheres for the contests of politicians and partisans (Enli, 2017). For instance, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton chose Twitter to announce her presidential candidacy in tandem with a YouTube video titled "Getting Started" for the U.S. presidential election in 2016, instead of initiating a press conference and relying on traditional media to publicize her message. Donald Trump, her GOP opponent, is known for his obsessive use of Twitter to promul-

gate campaign messages to the over 50 million followers (Wells et al., 2016). In Europe and elsewhere, Larsson and Moe (2012) found that Twitter contributed to the broadening of public debate on the 2010 Swedish election, which echoes findings presented by Bruns and Burgess (2011) on Twitter use in the 2010 Australian election. Anstead and O'Loughlin (2015) examined social media use in the 2010 U.K. general election; they found that many political journalists used social media as if they were equated with public opinion. These examples showcase that social media can function as a bellwether or radar for politicians and journalists to read public opinion. Thus, social media may make or break a politician. Assembling support on social media has been regarded as a prerequisite for winning an election, whereas a small gaffe or blunder made by candidates that "goes viral" on social media can jeopardize their political career.

On the other hand, despite social media's increasingly important role in electoral politics across many countries, scholars have questioned the extent to which social media can accurately reflect the real political environment, especially voices from under-represented citizen groups who may not be online or present on social media. For example, Murthy (2015) contends that the "buzz" generated by politicians on social media often fails to be an accurate predictor of the predominant public opinion and, eventually, the electoral success. The distortion of public opinion on social media has been attributed to different reasons, including the disjunction between online political expressions and offline political behavior (e.g., Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

Recent studies have also examined the role that big technology firms play in configuring electoral politics. Kreiss and McGregor (2018) found that technology companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google are more active political agents than previously believed, which closely collaborated with political staffers to influence campaign communication in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Algorithms, bots, and other automated agents are also identified to be the "hidden players" to influence political communication for election (e.g., Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018). Meanwhile, because of the different technological features and functionalities afforded by various websites, Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor (2018) argued that it would be biased to equate online expressions on a certain social media platform to opinions on others. Scholars should therefore be aware of the complex contingencies of relying on specific social media platforms to monitor political communication for election.

Political Organizations and Activism

Apart from electoral politics, political organizations and civic groups have leveraged new media to mobilize activists in social movements, such as the Arab Spring in 2011, Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013, the sit-in "Umbrella Movement" in Hong Kong, and Taiwan's student-led Sunflower Movement in 2014. The new type of participatory and networked activism is conceptualized as "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), marked by the formation of collective identities and high levels of organizational resources facilitated by the ubiquitous social networks. According to Agarwal, Bennett, Johnson, and Walker (2014), contemporary social movements are often enabled by

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“crowds,” or what Rheingold (2002) called “smart mobs” that are either self-organizing or weakly enabled by formal political organizations. As a result, these crowd-enabled organizations are often “leaderless” or have distributed leadership but demonstrate the capability of supplementing or replacing traditional bureaucratic political organizations in some fields (Syrek, 2012).

The advances in ICTs offer a new set of participative tools for political actors and organizations to get information up to date. Leapfrogging to 4G and wireless Internet results in decreasing the cost of participation and provides citizens and groups of lower socioeconomic status with digital means of networking and participating in politics (Boulianne, 2017; Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018; Liu, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, & Pang, 2016; Wei, 2016). Scholars (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; June, Toriumi, & Mizukoshi, 2013; Wei, Lo, Lu, & Hou, 2014) found that social and mobile media play an important role in local activism and national politics. Focusing on Facebook, the world’s most popular social network service (SNS), Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) reported that specific uses of SNS (e.g., being a member of a political group) were associated with political activism, triggered by political information users received from like-minded members in the social group. Others (Skoric, 2015) have presented similar findings: using a mobile phone to express opinions and discussing political issues are positively related to both offline and online participation. Structurally, free and independent news media constitute a key democratic institution. From the institutional view of media (Schudson, 2002), new media scholars (Cheng, Liang, & Leung, 2015) suggested that mobile social media have emerged as a public sphere for informational exchange and engagement in civic discourse. With numerous activist groups and political organizations at play, the decentralized new media may become a robust nontraditional political institution that fills a gaping void for public participation.

Hybrid Media System: New Power Players

Modern politics increasingly incorporates new power players, which is characterized by the ceaseless interplay between a myriad of individuals, organizations, or even nonhuman artifacts that create and steer information flows in both traditional and new media outlets. From Julian Assange’s great effort of using WikiLeaks to reveal political information that is otherwise inaccessible to the public, to the collective use of “#Metoo” and “#Neveragain” in both online and offline activist campaigns, the clash of older and newer media logics has redefined the contemporary landscape of political communication, initiating an age of far-reaching change. Chadwick (2017) argues that new ICTs have reshaped both politics and media, creating a “hybrid media system” where traditional and new media logics coexist, cofunction, and co-evolve to create an integrated and hybrid media environment. The hybrid system thus rejects the simplistic distinctions between old and new media, professional journalists and amateur bloggers, politicians and grassroots activists, but rather emphasizes the organic integration and symbiosis of disparate political actors and mechanisms in advanced democracies. Recent research (e.g., Wells et al., 2016; Zhang, Wells, Wang, & Rohe, 2017) has adopted this analytical framework to explain the formation of social media-based publics in the 2016 U.S. election, which illustrates the increasingly popular strategy of using “hybrid media campaigning” to gain public attention

and support. In light of built-in hybridity, many seemingly independent political actors and events can be construed as connected episodes in the ongoing construction of a hybrid media system.

Political Content on New Media

Infotainment and Soft News

Infotainment, a portmanteau of information and entertainment, is considered a hallmark of contemporary political communication and media coverage (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). The rapid growth of political content in entertainment venues has blurred the distinction between “hard news” and entertainment content (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005). For instance, late-night political talk shows in the United States have been functioning as alternative yet influential sources of political knowledge (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Roth et al., 2014). More importantly, new media have become the primary channel through which infotainment content is transmitted to the viewing public, with news content made by professional journalists and political “memes” generated by web users emerging on the Internet simultaneously. The popularity of infotainment has profoundly influenced how politics is perceived and communicated. According to Serazio (2018), an increasing number of campaign consultants seek to adapt dry political narratives into more pleasurable genres enriched with social media opportunities: “In that way, politics, seemingly inherently grave, necessitates its antithetical—those genre forms that might come across as more playful” (p. 134).

At the same time, the proliferation of soft news, a form of market-driven press releases subsidized by corporate public relations operations or campaign communication strategists, has caused a debate about whether it heralds the decline of traditional public communication or the beginning of a new era (e.g., Baum, 2002; Prior, 2003; Tandoc, 2018). For example, BuzzFeed.com, a popular soft news outlet, tends to publish content to maximize social reach instead of following traditional editorial norms and verifying processes (Tandoc, 2018). Therefore, news stories about the personal lives of politicians are “liked” and shared as a consequence of its news as entertainment format. The pursuit of amusement also accounts for the reason why the public relations team at the White House meticulously surveils press releases that may harm its image, and why politicians could become widespread memes on social media (Ott, 2017; Ross & Rivers, 2017), which could bring fame to a novice political actor or destroy a veteran politician’s reputation in a flash.

What is the impact of political infotainment and soft news on democracy? Scholars (Baum, 2005; Browning & Sweetser, 2013; Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001; Feldman & Young, 2008; Landreville, Holbert, & LaMarre, 2010) have identified its beneficial and detrimental effects on the citizenry. Specifically, research has shown that political content in infotainment format is appealing to audiences; in addition, it also increases audience’s political knowledge and enhances their attention to politics (Hardy, Gottfried, Winneg, &

Jamieson, 2014). On the other hand, it may induce cynicism about politics in audiences. Poling jokes at politicians and political institutions can lead to distrust toward political actors and institutions (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Jebril, Albaek, & Vreese, 2013). In the long run, the proliferation of infotainment messages might exacerbate political polarization, as ideological bias is native in this type of political message (Hardy et al., 2014).

The Debate of Rising “Fake News”

Rising faking news (e.g., news that is fabricated or doctored using online tactics) has become quickly part of public and political discourse. Fake news has generated a debate globally, with most of the discussion in a political context (Lazer et al., 2018). Although the term itself is not new, the debate has been revived given its conceptual, empirical, and normative implications in modern politics. Conceptually, its definitions can be ambiguous or vary significantly by contexts. For example, “fake news” is used to refer to political satire and parody (e.g., *The Onion*), misinformation (e.g., exaggeration or misrepresentation of facts), or completely fabricated content (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Therefore, fake news technically exists in the same ecosystem with “disinformation” and “misinformation,” and politicians often use these terms interchangeably with different intentions for achieving different political goals (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Some scholars thus emphasize that the real intention behind news making is the key factor that differentiates “fake news” from other alternatives. In line with it, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) defined fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false” (p. 231), which differentiates fake news from reporting mistakes, rumors, and political satire.

Empirically, new media channels (social media in particular) are identified to be primary conduits of disseminating fake news (Lazer et al., 2018), although to what extent fake news is prevalent and influential in elections remains a contentious topic. According to Grinberg et al. (2019), who examined Twitter use during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, 6% of the overall news consumption was “fake news”; however, they also found that the consumption of fake news was heavily concentrated, with 0.1% of the users sharing 80% of the fake news. The findings echo those of Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler (2018), who found that most visits to fake news websites came from a small number of people, with Trump supporters visiting the most fake news websites. The results question the validity of conceptualizing “fake news” as a mass reach social problem, which showcases that the majority of political exposures still come from new sources that are not responsible for making and disseminating fake news.

Normatively, the rise of fake news has not only undermined the legitimacy of news itself as a form of political discourse but also challenged the traditional gatekeeping role of professional journalists (Borden & Tew, 2007). Lazer et al. (2018) suggested that the upsurge in the debate of fake news “highlights the erosion of long-standing institutional bulwarks against misinformation in the internet age” (p. 1094). Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) noted that because social media have a more decentralized structure than traditional media, the lack of fact-checking and third-party filtering contributes to the circulation of fake news. In contrast with the classic gatekeeping model, in which me-

media practitioners decide which political issues to report for the public, citizen journalism has enabled non-journalists to engage in journalistic production, which inevitably complicates gatekeeping (Tandoc et al., 2018). Additionally, the use of bots and other manipulative algorithms to disseminate fake news has also challenged the social responsibility ideals of media practitioners (Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018), forcing established news organizations such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* to deploy fact-checking procedures to correct misinformation widely spread on social media (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). Fake news in the social media sphere that is attributed to hackers or cyberattackers has underscored a nontraditional actor in politics. Using machine learning techniques to create and diffuse “deep fakes” of seemingly convincing videos posted online, the role of hackers as self-invited actors in political campaigns was observed in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Morgan (2018) argued that fake news that was created to diffuse disinformation and manipulate public opinion undermines democracy.

Effects of New Media on Political Communication

Agenda Setting

One of the most widely applied political communication theories is agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which states that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about (p. 177). Facing the advances in new ICTs, a variety of alternative theories rooted in the original hypothesis have been proposed and tested over the past decades. For example, the second-level agenda setting deals with attribute salience in news coverage of issues and politicians, addressing the question of “how people think about media agendas” that the original theory did not answer (McCombs et al., 1997).

More recently, the “third-level agenda setting” (also known as the “Network Agenda Setting Model”) centers on the argument that “the news media can bundle sets of objects or attributes and make these bundles of elements salient in the public’s mind simultaneously” (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2012, p. 51). In an era where user-generated content is ubiquitous, mass media can no longer monopolize news creation; hence its power of setting agenda for the public. Therefore, reverse agenda setting (Brosius & Weimann, 1996) has been employed to describe the process in which public concern reflected in user-generated content (i.e., blogs, social media) influences media agenda. Likewise, intermedia agenda setting (Neuman, Guggenheim, Mo Jan, & Bae, 2014; Roberts & McCombs, 1994) contends that user-generated content has equally powerful capacity to as mass media content, which often exert mutual influence on each other. Like McCombs (2005) observed, “All in all, this research has grown far beyond its original domain” (p. 543).

Opinion Leadership

More than half a century ago, Katz and Lazarsfeld came up with some of the enduring concepts in political communication, such as “opinion leadership” and the “two-step flow.” The theory posits that “ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population” (Katz, 1957, p. 61). Like agenda setting, opinion leadership has been re-examined in contemporary media contexts. Calling for a paradigm shift, Bennett and Manheim (2006, p. 213) suggested a “one-step flow model,” in which even the influence of opinion leaders is more limited in contemporary communication environments because of the trends of refined targeting messages and the fragmented and differentiated nature of the Internet. The one-step flow model reflects the transformation in both media consumption and power relations. The rapid change landscape of new media also provides people with alternatives to the traditional channels of information seeking and challenges the assertion that radio and print are always firsthand (Case et al., 2004). In an article named “One Step, Two Step, Network Step?” Hilbert et al. (2017) examined different information flow models in social media and concluded that although the two-step flow model remains relevant, the theory must be extended to account for the increasingly complex intermediating mechanisms in online communication.

Third-Person Effect

The third-person effect (TPE) hypothesis theorizes a common phenomenon in public opinion research that a person exposed to a persuasive message in the mass media sees it as having a greater effect on others (“them”) rather than on him- or herself or “you” (Davison, 1983). Although most of the research on media and public opinion examines media effect on people’s beliefs, TPE scholars are more interested in exploring people’s beliefs about media effects, or the influence of presumed influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003). Past TPE research examined the perceptual and behavior effects of a wide range of messages or media, including opinion polls (Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011), political advertising (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Wei & Lo, 2007), entertainment media (Lo & Wei, 2002), and social media (Lim & Golan, 2011; Wei & Golan, 2013). The results consistently demonstrate the individuals’ tendency to overestimate the impact of political messages on others while underestimating the effect of such messages on themselves. Several factors are found to affect the strength of the TPE, including message attributes (positive vs. negative), perceived social distance (“us” as in-groups vs. “them” in out-groups), and perceived reach of media.

Recent research has shifted attention to explore the behavioral consequences of third-person perception. The consequences of TPE concerning political behavior include defiance and compliance (Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009). Defiance occurs when the presumed effect motivates people to act, either active opposition or passive resistance, whereas compliance takes place when third-person opinions become the perceived social norms, and people are motivated to comply with the hypothetical “others.” In the context of digital media, the behavioral effects examined expand to online activism (Lim & Golan,

2011; Wei & Golan, 2013) and corrective action (e.g., a series of offline and online behaviors that seek to enrich public debate and “correct” what are seen as potential biases in the public sphere (see Rojas, 2010).

Hostile Media Effect

Another theory that illustrates the presumed influence of media on the public is the hostile media effect (HME). Originally known as the hostile media phenomenon or hostile media perception, it is a perceptual theory of media effect that accounts how partisans of activist groups have the inclination to perceive media coverage as biased against their opinions (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). One of the core assumptions of HME is that whether or not journalists’ reports are objective and balanced, it does not matter to partisans who are motivated to view neutral content as harboring a hostile bias against their own stance. Proponents of the HME thus believe that this phenomenon cannot merely be explained by the presence of bias in the news reports because partisans from both sides of an issue perceive the same coverage as hostile (Vallone et al., 1985). The HME illustrates notions of the active audience and showcases that audiences do not passively receive media content, but instead selectively interpret it in favor of their own predispositions and values (Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Vallone, Lepper, & Ross, 1981).

A separate line of research has accumulated evidence supporting the argument that political identification plays a critical role in the formation of HME. Christen, Kannaovakun, and Gunther (2002) investigated partisan perceptions of hostile bias in news coverage of the 1997 Teamsters Union strike against United Parcel Service. They found that both partisan groups perceived neutral news coverage as biased against their sides. However, several scholars argued that apart from political identification, other variables such as source, individual biases, and perceived public opinion should also be considered. A good example would be the research of Huye and Glynn (2010), who conducted a three-wave panel study and found that although the HME did exist in terms of respondents’ perceptions of biased media coverage, its impact on perceived public opinion was trivial compared with individual biases. The implications of HME for political communications were explored in research of online activism. In the online media environment in which partisan media flourish, HME was found to trigger corrective civic actions (Rojas, 2010).

Political Information and Participation

Fundamentally, free and independent news media constitute a critical democratic institution. From the institutional view of media (Schudson, 2002), new media scholars (Cheng et al., 2015; Wei & O’Boyle, 2016) suggested that mobile social media have emerged as a public sphere for informational exchange and civic engagement. Moreover, mobile media may become a robust political institution that fills a gaping void for public participation. In countries where limited or no institutionalized channels exist for citizens to engage in political issues and participate in the political process, scholars paid increasing attention to the questions of if and how new media fill the gap. The scholarly interest was fueled by the global popularity of social media platforms and mobile devices in non-Western coun-

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tries, which have bypassed desktop computing and wired Internet connectivity caused by low personal computer penetration rate and poor telecommunications infrastructure. For example, over 1 billion people use Facebook (170 million in Africa, 818 million in Asia, and 116 million in the Middle East) and Twitter in non-Western countries, and nearly 3 billion people in Asia own a mobile phone, with 80% of them being Internet-enabled smartphones. Research (Liu, 2015; Yang, 2007) has addressed questions about the potential of social media to help stem or even reverse patterns of political inequality that exist in non-Western, authoritarian countries by expanding access to digital sources of political information, functioning as an outlet for voicing opinion on controversial issues and creating public opinion online to influence public policy, as well as serving as tools for organizing political activities. Using digital media to acquire information on public issues makes individuals more informed and motivated to express opinions on those issues, especially in countries such as China, where state control of media is tight, and the press are party organs (Wei, Huang, & Zheng, 2018). Research further shows that in countries where Facebook and Twitter are blocked, native social media platforms, such as blogging site Weibo, Twitter-like WeChat in China, Telegram in Iran, and Line in Southeast Asia, facilitated the formation of a vibrant civic discourse in cyberspace (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi, & Tian, 2012; Yang, 2003).

Past research also examined the role of culture as a key factor in affecting political participation via social media in non-Western societies. Skoric and colleagues (2016) explored how the expressive use of social media is related to political expressions in different political systems across five Confucian Asian states, which shares a cultural tradition of respecting authorities and putting an emphasis of collective good over individual rights. Findings show the strongest relationship between using social media and political participation in democratic states (South Korean and Taiwan), followed by hybrid (Hong Kong and Singapore), and authoritarian (China) systems.

Similar to the research conducted in the United States, research in international settings (Boulianne, 2017; Chan, 2016; Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018) also examined how the decentralized and inexpensive digital and mobile networks offer tools for the rising middle class to participate in civic activism and politics; these tools range from mass emailing, instant messaging, bulletin board system (BBS), chat groups, virtual conferencing, and mobile apps. Dimitrova and Matthes (2018) argued that the positive effects of use of social media for political participation are documented around the world. However, Boulianne (2017) found that the magnitude of social media's effects on participation depends on political systems. The effects tend to be smaller in Western countries like the United States. In non-Western countries, the impact of digital media on political participation is more noticeable and likely stronger at times of crisis, or what Skoric and Poor (2013, p. 189) called "episodic political use" of social media, that would make a difference in disseminating messages, mobilizing, and organizing participation.

Using a cross-cultural approach, Willnat and Aw (2014) tested the effects of culture in affecting political communication in terms of accessing political information, discussing politics, and participating in politics via social media in nine Asian countries. Results of sur-

vey data from 3,500 respondents suggest that cultural norms and traditions “inhibit” on-line political discussions (p. 281). Japanese and South Korean respondents, for instance, prefer discussing politics privately, face-to-face, to chatting about politics on social media outlets. They concluded that cultural norms and tradition can influence the use of social media for political communication significantly.

In sum, the question of *if* social media positively affect political communication in non-Western countries is unequivocally affirmative. The question of *how*, on the other hand, is more complicated than a linear relationship reported in the literature. Research (e.g., Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012) has identified and examined a range of conditioning factors or mechanisms, which include political interest, digital literacy, civic skills, and social capital. Broad political systems and national culture also matter. The insights drawn from these findings point to new directions for further researching culture’s consequences for political communication in digital new media.

Conclusion

The article provides a synopsis of the complex relationship between new media and politics, with a review of research about how ongoing revolution in ICTs has fundamentally transformed the landscape of democracy and the way people engage in politics. The article focuses on the actor, content, and effect aspects of political communication on a social media and emerging media, with an account on research of new media effects on politics in international setting and cross-cultural contexts. The article leads to the following conclusions:

On the one hand, democracy is anchored in the public’s civic engagement and political participation, which embodies the “quintessential act of democratic citizenship” (Lamprianou, 2013, p. 21). The existent research shed some insights into the question of whether new media are friend or foe of the democratic cause. Theories of new media and politics suggest that new media offer new forms of engagement and direct or mediated participation in politics. The rising civic and activism activities across the world bear witness to the enabling power of new media.

On the other hand, findings of empirical political communication research about the role of new media in the political process are ambivalent. The relationships and interactions between digital media, politics, and society are more complex than previously thought. New media can limit or even inhibit political participation by galvanizing activist groups to mobilize biases, poisoning norms of political discourse, and polarizing partisans and voters. In addition, the documented or feared effects of digital media on politics give rise to new concerns such as use of bots and trolls in disseminating fake news; privacy and state surveillance of citizens; and the privatization of public communication. These new concerns call for more rigorous and longitudinal studies in the era of ubiquitous and inescapable media presence in politics.

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