



Social Media as a Public Space for Politics: Cross-National Comparison of News Consumption and Participatory Behaviors in the United States and the United Kingdom

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Despite the recognized influence media have over participatory political behaviors, few studies perform systematic and direct cross-national comparisons of news use and its effects on citizenship in different countries. And even fewer studies consider social media news use. By analyzing comparable and concurrently collected survey data from the United States and the United Kingdom, this study explores how traditional media use and the use of social media for news impact citizens' political engagement in both nations. Despite differences in terms of media use, political knowledge, political efficacy, and political participation, evidence in both cases confirms the meaningful role social media play in promoting citizens' political engagement.

Keywords: news use, social media, political participation, cross-national studies

As two of the largest Western liberal democracies, the United States and the United Kingdom share more than a language. Media use for news, traditional or social, and political engagement are essential parts of the democratic political system that the countries share. This common context provides the basis for a rich cross-national comparison of the role of media in the democratic process. A good amount of scholarship in the United States (Chadwick & Howard, 2008; Hwang, Schmierbach, Paek, Gil de Zuniga, & Shah, 2006; Kang & Kwak, 2003; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012) and Europe (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Livingstone & Bovill, 2013; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Wattenberg, 2012) has demonstrated how media affects political participation,

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and from these individual studies we can begin to surmise some of the key differences between these two nations. Scholars have compared political behavior between these two countries, noting differences in partisanship and voting behavior (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Wattenberg, 2012). However, what we aim to add to this literature is a substantive comparison of the two countries across the *same* variables at the *same* moment in time, with a particular focus on social media use and political participation. To that end, we ask: What are some of the key differences between the United States and the United Kingdom in their relationship between media use and political participation?

Through an analysis of generalizable national surveys conducted concurrently in both the United States and the United Kingdom, we find that citizens from each country exhibit several differences in terms of media use, political knowledge, political efficacy, and political participation. Nevertheless, evidence from both countries confirms the important and positive influence social media have on the political process. The present study contributes to cross-national research by offering a comparison of media use and political participation in two major Western democracies.

Media Systems in the United States and the United Kingdom

According to the World Press Trends report, digital news audiences increased by 23% in 2013, while print circulation has continued to decline. However, newspaper readership levels remain high in both Western Europe and North America. Britain, for instance, continues to have one of the highest levels of newspaper readership in the world (Sanders & Hanna, 2012; World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, 2014).

Although the U.S. and UK media systems share some similarities, there are key features that differentiate them. One of the most relevant features of Britain's news culture is the importance of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the British state-sponsored news outlet and the oldest national broadcasting organization in the world (Nieman Journalism Lab, n.d.). The BBC dominates the British media landscape and has become a point of reference for journalism standards in the United Kingdom (Sanders & Hanna, 2012). A license fee collected from British television viewers funds the BBC—it is not state-controlled, yet it gives a sense of independence from advertisers. In terms of audience, BBC One, BBC Radio, and the BBC website/app are by far the most used news sources among UK adults (Ofcom, 2014).

On the other hand, the U.S. media is increasingly concentrated in major corporations, which in some cases control everything from initial production to final distribution (Free Press, 2014). *Business Insider* (Lutz, 2014) estimates that six corporations (Comcast, NewsCorp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS) control 90% of the media in America, including the movie industry and some of the top newspapers in the world.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) have developed one of the most cited comparisons of media systems within Western democracies. Considering the development of media markets, the extent to which the media system reflects a country's political divisions, the development of journalistic professionalism, and the degree and nature of state intervention in the media system, they grouped European and North

American countries in three categories: the polarized pluralist model, the North/Central Europe or democratic corporatist model, and the North Atlantic or liberal model. Hallin and Mancini treat the media systems in these countries as concrete social formations that developed under particular historical conditions and that, therefore, have their own particular features.

The United States and the United Kingdom both fall into the liberal model, sharing such characteristics as early democratization as nations, weak involvement of the state in the economy and citizens' private lives, early development of a mass-circulation commercial press, and strong professionalization of journalism. However, some features make the United States quite different from the other countries in the liberal model, and the United Kingdom shares some similarities with countries in the democratic corporatist model. For instance, U.S. public-service broadcasting has always been marginal and commercially driven and carried a high amount of local news. By contrast, public-service television has played a central role in the British media history, and it is the main feature the United Kingdom shares with the democratic corporatist system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Other scholars have also found differences between countries in the liberal model. Aalberg, Van Aelst, and Curran (2010) analyzed the flow of political information on TV across six Western countries over a 30-year period, and they found the United States to be significantly different from the United Kingdom, and also from the other countries in their sample. In general, there is little similarity within the liberal system when it comes to political information on TV. "The peak-time and evening news provision of news and current affairs on leading channels is 6 times higher in the United Kingdom than in the United States" (Aalberg et al., 2010, p. 267). The authors attribute these differences to resources and regulation: Whereas U.S. public television is weak, underresourced, and subject to minimal regulation, public television in northern Europe is relatively well financed and regulated.

The United States and the United Kingdom are both examples of the liberal model of media systems, and yet there is enough evidence to treat them as different entities in terms of media. Following Hallin and Mancini (2004), a different way of organizing political power will lead to a different way of organizing the media. We aim to discover whether this differentiation affects citizens' news consumption and, in turn, their political participation.

Political Participation and Its Antecedents

Originally, researchers studying political participation defined it as acts related to electoral activities such as voting and working for political parties (Conway, 1985). This construct has since been expanded to be more inclusive of other behaviors that aim to influence government action and policy making (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Verba et al. (1995) argued that measures of political participation should also include working for the community or attending a protest, while other scholars (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012) added making a campaign contribution, participating in groups that took any local action for social or political reform, and writing a letter to a politician or editor of a newspaper to the cadre of measurable political participation activities.

The Internet, insofar as it hosts political discourse, offers new ways for citizens to participate in public affairs and elections (Chadwick & Howard, 2008). As such, recent studies have examined online political participation as a related but distinct construct from off-line political participation (see Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Some online measures mimic their off-line counterparts, such as using the Internet to write to a politician or sign up for a campaign, but others are uniquely tied to the medium, as when users post comments on a political blog or subscribe to a political electronic mailing list (Valenzuela et al., 2012). These computer-mediated forms of political participation are empowered by their relative ease of use. This affordance both lowers the cost of participation and provides the public greater access to political elites. Online political participation does not take away from more traditional forms, but provides an outlet to those who may not engage in more boots-on-the-ground activities.

The very origins of media effects theory analyzed the influence of media on political behavior. In half a century of media effects scholarship, many studies have linked news media consumption to political participation both in the United States (see Hwang et al., 2006; Kang & Kwak, 2003; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003) and Europe (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Beyer & Matthes, in press; Livingstone & Bovill, 2013; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). In addition, evidence shows that news consumption leads to increased political knowledge and cultivates a sense of political efficacy (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005; Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003). These relationships exist for not only traditional media but digital media. A longitudinal study of American National Election Studies data found that, as of the 2004 election, digital media use for political information affects political engagement (Bimber & Copeland, 2013). In addition, a substantial body of work now exists linking social media use for news with political participation (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013). It is certainly worth noting that these more personalized forms of news consumption, via social media, take place in the same sphere that online political action occurs—again, lowering the bar to participate.

As with many other individual antecedents, news consumption not only is an established predictor of political participation (Moon, 2013; Neufeind, Jiraneck, & Wehner, 2013) but generally leads to political knowledge (Fraile, 2013). Scholars also provide evidence of a positive relationship between levels of news media use and political knowledge (Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014; Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011; Kaufhold, Valenzuela, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010; Weaver & Drew, 1995). Political knowledge can, in fact, trigger political participation by increasing one's feelings of political efficacy. For example, political knowledge is positively correlated with political efficacy, both of which mediate the effects of news on political participation (Jung et al., 2011). In fact, a shortage of political knowledge in part explains low rates of political participation (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007).

Finkel (1985), drawing on the work of Pateman (1970) and Thompson (1970), defined political efficacy as "the sense of being capable of acting effectively in the political realm" (Finkel, 1985, p. 892). Political efficacy has been consistently and closely linked to political participation (Cohen, Vigoda, & Samorly, 2001; Delli Carpini, 2004; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Studies have also tied political efficacy to news media use—people's awareness of political affairs, via the media, encourages feelings of political efficaciousness (Delli Carpini, 2004; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999).

Political Participation in the United States

Social scientists have long been interested in political participation, but a renewed vigor seems to stem from a shared concern about decreasing levels of civic engagement and even base measures of participation such as voting. Perhaps typified best by *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000), this area of research explicates a citizenry that is increasingly disengaged from traditional modes of political participation. But some scholars, including digital optimists, counter that these views are hyperbolic (e.g., Bennett, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012)—perhaps it's just that political participation itself needs to be redefined and expanded to mediums beyond door knocks and ballot boxes.

Many people are continuously connected to the Web, so ease of use may lower the barrier to online political engagement. In the United States, the Internet has achieved widespread adoption, as 87% of U.S. adults are online (Pew Research Center, 2014) and using social media, especially Facebook (71%) and Twitter (23%) (Pew Research Center, 2015). Two-thirds of social media users have engaged at some level in different online political activities, such as following an elected official or candidate for office or encouraging others to vote (Pew Research Internet Project, 2012). In fact, Kim, Hsu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2013) surveyed U.S. Internet users and found that discussion and information sharing through social media *is* the very reason that social media contribute to civic participation and engagement. Given the high penetration of Internet use among Americans and the comparable pervasive use of social media, it is good news for democracy at large that studies find positive associations between social media use and prosocial behaviors.

Online social networks are important for political participation because they expand the possibility of connecting politically with others. For instance, Valenzuela and colleagues (2012) explored the relationship between online discussion networks and online political participation for U.S. Internet users. Following the notion of the strength of weak ties proposed in Granovetter's seminal work (1973), they found larger online networks and the frequency of weak-tie discussions are associated with online political participation. Further, Valenzuela et al. (2012) confirmed previous studies that show offline political participation, news use, and political efficacy all strongly predict online political participation. Weak-tie connections spur political participation but also contribute to and secure an informed public opinion. For instance, within the context of social media, political knowledge may also be transferred through these weak tie social connections (Leonardi & Meyer, 2015). Reading and discussing political information in online settings is also a key precursor in mobilizing individuals. For instance, U.S. blog readers who rely on online news for information were more likely to participate politically in the same sphere (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010).

Political Participation in the United Kingdom

Although the United Kingdom generally enjoys higher voter turnout rates than the United States (comparing 65.1% to 58.2%¹ in the 2010 and 2012 elections, respectively; Desilver, 2015; UK Political Info, 2015) it, too faces a similar downward trend in this baseline measure of political participation. With

the British government enjoying a generally contented citizenry, it is not surprising to see low-stakes activities flourishing. Low-cost political activities such as donating money or signing a petition were among the most common forms of engagement for UK residents (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003). The motivation for these traditional forms of engagement varied, but key factors were access to resources, involvement in informal networks, and mobilization.

As in the United States, British citizens have increasingly turned to the Internet—and especially social media—as an outlet for political engagement. The country shows one of the highest levels of Internet penetration in the world (87%) as well as a high mobile penetration (130%) (Kemp, 2014). In 2013, 36 million (73%) adults in Great Britain accessed the Internet daily (Office for National Statistics, 2013), with 79% belonging to Facebook and 44% on Twitter. With social media use penetration levels on par with the United States, we expect to see similar effects on users, especially for those who use the Web for news or prosocial purposes such as political discussion or engagement.

Thirty-eight percent of British Internet users engage in online political activities; they most commonly reported looking for information about political or government services (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006). Although the overall low levels of online political participation mirrored low levels of off-line political engagement, with slightly more people reporting off-line activities, there appear to be segments of the population that increasingly turn to the Web to participate in politics. Using a more “contextualized” model of online participation, Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward (2005) found that young people and those highly familiar with the Internet were more likely to engage in online political activities. Similar to previous findings for the United States, Gibson et al. (2005) found that the Internet not only worked to increase political activity of those already engaged but facilitated an easier path toward political engagement for those who are less active or those who under other conditions would be unlikely to engage in politics.

Although scholarship in the United States and Great Britain finds common trends and reaches many similar conclusions regarding the role of media in facilitating political engagement, the literature discussed here finds evidence of differences between both countries. As explained, their media systems are different, and so is their citizens’ news media consumption. Participatory behaviors are higher in United Kingdom, and those differences may be explained by the countries’ differences in news use. Although traditional media in the United States and the United Kingdom differ in structure and use, digital media penetration appears fairly homogeneous. And yet a strong comparative case has not been made, and a study including news consumption in both traditional and social media environments would shed light on how participatory behaviors might be affected. By comparing these two countries—with some shared traits, but many disparate ones—we aim to learn more about the effects that news media consumption on different platforms have on political participation in both countries.

As such, our first research question is:

RQ1: How different or similar are residents of the United States and United Kingdom in terms of political knowledge (RQ1a), political efficacy (RQ1b), news consumption (RQ1c), off-line political participation (RQ1d), and online political participation (RQ1e)?

Second, since a relationship between news media use and political participation has been established in the United States and in the United Kingdom, we explore how news use and political participation relate to each other in both countries.

RQ2: How do news consumption (in both traditional and social media platforms) and political participation relate to each other when taking in consideration political knowledge and political efficacy?

Finally, we aim to uncover the differences between this democratically important media effects model across the United States and Britain. Therefore, we ask:

RQ3: What are the strongest predictors for political participation in the United States and the United Kingdom?

Method

The data for this study come from two surveys conducted by the Digital Media Research Program (DMRP) at the University of Texas at Austin, and administered online using Qualtrics, a Web survey software to which the authors have a university subscription account. For the U.S. data, participants were selected from among those who registered to participate in an online panel administered by the media-polling group Nielsen. Nielsen employs a stratified quota sampling to recruit participants from more than 200,000 people. To achieve national representativeness, a quota based on gender, age, education, and income was established so the sample matches well the distribution of these demographic variables as reported by the U.S. census (to learn more about this data collection strategy, see Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

The U.S. survey was conducted between December 15, 2013, and January 5, 2014, from an initial sample of 5,000 individuals. In total, 2,060 participants responded, and 247 cases were deleted for incomplete or invalid data. Employing the American Association of Public Opinion Research's (2011) response rate calculator, the response rate was 34.6%. This response rate falls within acceptable parameters for Web-based surveys (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003).

Compared to the U.S. census, the sample had slightly younger, more educated participants and had fewer Hispanics. However, the overall sample was comparable to other surveys employing random collection methods (Pew Research Center, n.d.) and was comparable to the national population as a whole (see Appendix A for a detailed demographic breakdown). The sample was evenly split between women (49.5%) and men (49.6%).

Like the U.S. data, UK participants were selected from a panel curated by Survey Sampling International using proprietary cluster census matching, Dynamix, to guarantee generalizable representation of UK population. The survey was conducted concurrently to the U.S. data collection to preserve parity. The data collection for the United Kingdom ended in March 2014. In total, 1,529 participants responded, and 451 cases were deleted for incomplete or invalid data. Also employing the

American Association of Public Opinion Research's (2011) response rate calculator, the response rate was 34.6%.

Compared to the UK census,² the sample had older, more educated participants, and women and Whites are slightly overrepresented. However, the overall sample was comparable to the national population as a whole (see Appendix B for a detailed demographic breakdown).

Statistical Analysis

First, we answer RQ1 by employing a series of *t* tests to compare the United States and United Kingdom in terms of people's political knowledge, political efficacy, news use, and political participation.³ Next, to answer RQ2, we ran zero-order and partial-order Pearson's correlations to ascertain the ways in which news use and political participation relate to each other. To control for other variables that have been found to be related to each of the variables of interest (news use and political participation), partial-order Pearson's correlations included the demographics, political efficacy, and political knowledge variables (Jung et al., 2011; Martin, 2008; McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002). Finally, to answer RQ3 and identify the strongest predictors of political participation in the United States and United Kingdom, linear regression models were conducted for each country.

Variables of Interest

News use. Two additive indexes of news use were created to measure people's news use in two different platforms: traditional media outlets and social network sites. The variable *traditional media use for news* was created by combining eight items asking people how often they used different media outlets to get news (television, print, radio, fake news programs, network/local TV news, cable/satellite news, local newspapers and radio news/talk shows), in a 10-point Likert-type scale where 1 = *never* and 10 = *all the time* (eight items; $\alpha = .75$, range = 1 to 10, $M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.84$). Similarly, the variable *social media use for news* was created by combining eight items asking people how often they used different social media platforms to get news (Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Google+, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest), in a 10-point scale where 1 = *never* and 10 = *all the time* (eight items; $\alpha = .87$, range = 1 to 10, $M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.5$).

Political participation. People's political participation was measured in two different environments: off-line and online. For *off-line political participation*, we used an additive index from the following items asking participants about whether they had engaged in any of the following activities during the past 12 months, using a 10-point scale where 1 = *never* and 10 = *all the time*: "attended/watched a public hearing, neighborhood or school meeting," "contacted an elected public official," "attended a political rally," "participated in any demonstrations, protests, or marches," "donated money to a campaign or political cause," "participated in groups that took any local action for social or

² 2011 census for England and Wales.

³ A corrected Bonferroni method was implemented to avoid potential family-wise error in using multiple comparisons (Hochberg, 1988).

political reform,” and “been involved in public interest groups, political action groups, political clubs, political campaigns, or political party committees.” We also included in this index how often (on a scale from 1 to 10) the participants voted in local/statewide elections and federal/presidential elections (nine items; $\alpha = .84$, range = 1 to 10, $M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.73$).

For *inline political participation*, people were asked about the following activities during the past 12 months, also in a 10-point scale: “signed or shared an online petition,” “participated in online political polls,” “participated in an online question-and-answer session with a politician or public official,” “created an online petition,” “signed up online to volunteer to help with a political cause,” and “used a mobile phone to donate money to a campaign or political cause via text message or app” (six items; $\alpha = .85$, range = 1 to 10, $M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.69$).

Control Variables

Demographics. Because the literature finds many individual social characteristics to be conducive to political activities (McLeod et al., 2002; Rojas & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010), this study controls for four key demographic variables in the partial correlations: people’s *age* ($M = 49$, $SD = 14.87$) and *ethnicity* (White = 82%) as well as their highest level of formal *education* attained, which ranged from 1 = *less than high school* to 8 = *doctoral degree* ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.54$, median = some college). *Household income* was measured with eight categories, where 1 = *less than \$10,000* and 8 = *\$200,000 or more* ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.55$, median = \$25,000 to \$49,999).

Political efficacy has been identified as a robust predictor of participatory behaviors—in this case, political participation (Jung et al., 2011). This variable was created by combining six items about public life measured in a 10-point scale, ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 10 = *strongly agree* with each of the following statements: “I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing our country,” “I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics,” “People like me can influence government,” “People like me don’t have any say in what the government does” (reverse coded), and “No matter whom I vote for, it won’t make a difference” (reverse coded) (five items; $\alpha = .68$, range = 1 to 10, $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.86$).

Finally, the study controls for the effect of **political knowledge**, a significant predictor of political participation (Jung et al., 2011). Participants were asked six questions measuring their knowledge about politics: “What job or political office does Joe Biden (U.S. participants)/Nick Clegg (UK participants) currently hold?” “For how many years is a United States senator (U.S. participants)/British member of parliament (UK participants) elected?” “What job or political office does John Roberts (U.S. participants)/Sir John Thomas (UK participants) currently hold?” “On which of the following does the U.S. federal government (U.S. participants)/UK government (UK participants) currently spend the least?” “Which organization’s documents were released by Edward Snowden?” and “Recently, the UN and U.S. were in negotiations with the Syrian government over the removal of...?” Although these six questions are exactly the same for both countries (changing the names of public officers only), the last two questions might be easier for U.S. citizens to answer. To avoid a possible confound in the results, we created two variables: political knowledge 1 (four items recoded as 1 = *right answer* and 0 = *wrong answer*, $KR-20 =$

.54, range = 0 to 4, $M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.14$), and political knowledge 2 (two items recoded as 1 = *right answer* and 0 = *wrong answer*, $KR-20 = .52$, range = 0 to 2, $M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.81$).

Results

RQ1 aims to identify the differences, if any, between U.S. and UK citizens in their levels of political knowledge, political efficacy, news use (through both traditional and social media), and off-line and online political participation. As shown in Table 1, news use in the United Kingdom is significantly higher than in the United States, considering both traditional news media outlets and social media platforms. The United States and United Kingdom present similar levels of online political participation, but off-line participation is higher in the United States. Americans also feel more politically efficacious and show higher levels of political knowledge, compared to British citizens (see Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in Political Knowledge and Media Use for News Between the United States and the United Kingdom

Variable	United States		United Kingdom		<i>T</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Political knowledge 1	2.07	1.17	1.45	0.97	15.5145***
Political knowledge 2	1.32	0.79	0.74	0.69	20.785***
Political efficacy	5.36	1.86	4.70	1.77	9.230***
Social media use for news	1.81	1.35	2.19	1.72	-5.875***
Traditional media use for news	5.00	1.84	5.45	1.80	-6.123***
Off-line political participation	3.47	1.65	3.00	1.82	6.837***
Online political participation	2.15	1.61	2.27	1.82	-1.742

Note. Means and standard deviations are calculated for 10-point Likert-type scales in all variables except *political knowledge 1* (4-point scale) and *political knowledge 2* (2-point scale).

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

RQ2 explores how news use and political participation relate to each other, if at all, in both countries. Results from both zero-order and partial-order Pearson's correlations indicate that, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, both traditional and social media use for news are associated with political participation, in both off-line and online environments. Coefficients for social media use and online political participation are the strongest correlations in both countries, suggesting that the more people use social media for getting news, the more they engage in online political behaviors. Social media use is also correlated with off-line political participation, but the relationship is weaker in both countries. The lowest coefficients are for the correlations of traditional media use and online political participation, although the relationship is significant (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Zero-Order Pearson's Correlations Between News Use and Political Participation in the United States and the United Kingdom

Country	Social media × off-line participation	Social media × online participation	Traditional media × off-line participation	Traditional media × online participation
United States (<i>N</i> = 1,709)	.328***	.468***	.365***	.252***
United Kingdom (<i>N</i> = 980)	.526***	.655**	.397***	.353***

Note. Cell entries correspond to the zero-order Pearson's correlation coefficients of social media; traditional media; political participation online, and political participation off-line, both in the United States and the United Kingdom.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Partial-Order Pearson's Correlations Between Media News Uses and Political Participation, Per Country.

Country	Social media × off-line participation	Social media × online participation	Traditional media × off-line participation	Traditional media × online participation
United States (<i>N</i> = 1,451)	.367***	.454***	.250***	.190***
United Kingdom (<i>N</i> = 848)	.515***	.604***	.340***	.344***

Note. Cell entries correspond to the Pearson's correlation coefficients of social media; traditional media; political participation online, and political participation off-line, both in the United States and the United Kingdom, controlling for political knowledge 1, political knowledge 2, political efficacy, age, gender, education, household income, and ethnicity.

*** $p < .001$.

RQ3 asks about the strongest predictors of political participation in each country. Standardized beta coefficients (shown in Table 4) indicate that, among demographics, age ($\beta = .131$, $p < .001$) and income ($\beta = .052$, $p < .05$) are significant predictors of off-line political participation in the United States—older people and those with higher income tend to participate more in off-line settings. In the United Kingdom, education ($\beta = .083$, $p < .01$) is a significant predictor of off-line political participation, indicating that citizens with more education have a higher likelihood of engaging in off-line political behaviors.

Table 4. Linear Regression Models for Political Participation in the United States and United Kingdom.

	Off-line political participation		Online political participation	
	United States (<i>N</i> = 1,494) β	United Kingdom (<i>N</i> = 864) β	United States (<i>N</i> = 1,518) β	United Kingdom (<i>N</i> = 887) β
Block 1: Demographics				
Gender	0.01	0.043	.057*	0.042
Race	0.035	0.04	0.003	0.019
Age	.131***	0.05	-0.002	-.067*
Education	0.038	.083**	-0.026	0.049
Household income	.052*	0.011	-.058*	0.003
ΔR^2 (%)	7.1***	8.0***	1.5***	10.8***
Block 2: Political background				
Political knowledge 1	.094***	.064*	0.049	0.015
Political knowledge 2	0.031	0.028	0	0.004
Political efficacy	.299***	.244***	.258***	.129***
ΔR^2 (%)	14.5***	12.2***	10.5***	5.8***
Block 3: News use				
Social media use for news	.310***	.451***	.429***	.569***
Traditional media use for news	.134***	.132***	.069*	.092**
ΔR^2 (%)	12.4***	22.5***	18.3***	31.0***
Total R^2 (%)	34.0***	42.7***	30.3***	47.5***

Note. Cell entries correspond to standardized regression coefficients.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

In terms of political background, political knowledge 1 ($\beta = .094$, $p < .001$) and political efficacy ($\beta = .299$, $p < .001$) significantly and positively predict off-line political participation for U.S. citizens. In other words, the more knowledgeable people are, and the more efficacious people feel, the more they engage politically. This is also true for UK citizens, where both political knowledge 1 ($\beta = .064$, $p < .05$) and political efficacy ($\beta = .244$, $p < .001$) predict participation in off-line environments.

Regarding news use, both social media use for news ($\beta = .310$, $p < .001$) and traditional media use for news ($\beta = .134$, $p < .001$) predict off-line political participation in the United States and in the United Kingdom ($\beta = .451$, $p < .001$ for social media use, and $\beta = .132$, $p < .001$ for traditional media

use). As the beta coefficients indicate, news use in both formats (traditional and social media) is a stronger predictor in the United Kingdom than in the United States. Regression models account for 34% of the variance of off-line political participation in the United States and 42.7% in the United Kingdom (see Table 4).

Last, when predicting online political participation, results from linear regression models indicate that gender ($\beta = .057, p < .05$) and income ($\beta = -.058, p < .05$) are significant demographic predictors in the United States, suggesting that men and people earning lower incomes have a higher likelihood of engaging in online political behaviors. In the United Kingdom, in contrast, age ($\beta = -.067, p < .05$) significantly and negatively predicts online political participation, indicating that the younger one is, the more likely one is to participate.

We found that political efficacy predicts online political engagement, but political knowledge does not. As shown in the off-line political participation model, the effect of political efficacy is stronger for U.S. citizens ($\beta = .258, p < .001$) than for UK citizens ($\beta = .129, p < .001$).

Finally, in terms of news use, social media use for news strongly predicts online political participation in the United States ($\beta = .429, p < .001$) and in the United Kingdom ($\beta = .569, p < .001$), and this effect is stronger for UK citizens. Regarding traditional media use for news, the effect of this variable is also significant in both the United States ($\beta = .069, p < .05$) and the United Kingdom ($\beta = .092, p < .01$), but the effect is not as strong as it is for social media use (see Table 4).

Discussion

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, news media play an important role in providing citizens with civic information and facilitating participation in the political process (e.g., Gibson et al., 2005; Gil de Zúñiga, 2002; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Despite the influence media have in each democracy, few systematic and direct cross-national comparison studies have examined news use and its effects on citizenship in these established Western democracies. The current study addresses this gap by exploring how traditional media use and social media use for news impact U.S. and UK citizens' participatory behaviors. Evidence from concurrent, generalizable national surveys conducted in each country demonstrates that citizens of these nations share some similarities but exhibit several notable differences in terms of media use, political knowledge, political efficacy, and political participation.

We find that UK citizens consume more news than their U.S. counterparts, both in terms of traditional news and through social media. This is consistent with available information on newspaper readership in both countries, which shows that 51.6% of UK adults read a daily paper, while only 41.6% of U.S. adults engage with daily papers (World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, 2014). Similarly, previous research has found that the three largest U.S. TV channels (NBC, ABC, and CBS) devote exceptionally little time to news and current affairs (Aalberg et al., 2010), compared to the BBC, which has a long tradition of providing public affairs programming in Britain (Nieman Journalism Lab, n.d.). These different media environments may lead to greater news exposure and, in turn, higher news consumption levels among UK citizens.

Surprisingly, UK citizens' additional time spent with news media did not result in greater aggregate political knowledge or political efficacy than that among U.S. citizens. As Zaller (2003) argues, people only need basic information to scan and feel sufficiently informed about public issues. This may explain why Americans, despite their lower levels of news consumption, feel more efficacious and score higher on political knowledge. Yet a superficial understanding of current affairs based on news scanning cannot alone sustain a healthy democracy. Our results indicate that UK citizens participate more in both off-line and online political activities. We attribute this behavior to higher levels of news consumption in both traditional and social media despite lower levels of political knowledge.

We find that news consumption is positively related to political participation in both countries. In other words, the more people consume news and political information, the more they participate in politics. This effect is stronger for UK citizens, especially when news comes from social media.

These findings demonstrate the important and positive influence that social media have on the political process in both countries. Social media are a source of political news and discussion for large segments of the public, and this computer-mediated engagement with political content contributes to civic participation. Our data confirm this, as social media for news positively predicted participatory behaviors in both countries. Traditional news has long been a critical factor in promoting discussions that increase participation in politics (e.g., Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). In addition, social networks help forge the weak social ties that are integral in broadening people's information environments and availing new opportunities for political participation (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). In addition, citizens can follow political groups and news organizations within social media. These personal associations and interactions within social media expose people to more political news and information, which they can subsequently share or discuss with others (e.g., Weeks & Holbert, 2013).

While social media use for news positively relates to political participation in both countries, it is interesting that this effect was much stronger for people in the United Kingdom. In viewing political knowledge as a general trait (Zaller, 1986), Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) understand that this "unidimensional model" of political knowledge is reliant on information sources, such as mass media, addressing a broad range of topics and therefore exposing individuals to a homogeneous pool of information. However, social media seems designed specifically to situate individuals in a personalized information atmosphere, which may explain why social media use for news contributes more to political participation in the United Kingdom than in the United States. For Americans, social media use for news complements the fragmented media system, providing highly personalized information and thus a gateway to political action (Bennett & Sergerberg, 2012). However, in United Kingdom, the BBC enjoys standard-setting status among journalists (Sanders & Hanna, 2012), but its various incarnations represent the most widely used news source among UK adults (Ofcom, 2014). When the British use social media for news, the personalized news stands in starker contrast to the BBC model. This more novel and personalized information bears the same politically energizing effect as it does on Americans, but, as we see, the effect is stronger among Britons.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that cultural contexts shape political systems and, in turn, media systems. As in other Western democracies, the media in the United States and in the United Kingdom are

market driven (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, there are clear differences between the U.S. and UK media environments. Even the commercial-oriented news outlets in the United Kingdom devote more time to public affairs, in contrast to U.S. media, creating a structural bias that leads to different political information environments (Aalberg et al., 2010). We believe these different political information environments are being transferred to social media, replicating traditional news consumption patterns. Social media use for news is an established and significant predictor of political participation (especially for online activities), but the strength of this predictor lies beyond personal—it is deeply rooted in the media system and political traditions of a nation.

Although important patterns emerge between the two countries, this study is limited in a few ways. While every effort was made to maintain consistency between the two surveys, some differences do exist. Nielsen (U.S.) and Survey Sampling International (UK) surveyed participants using the same questions in the same time period, but their recruitment processes are not exactly the same, although both ensure generalizable representation of the population. Also, with cross-sectional data, the observed relationships cannot be treated as causal, though the findings theoretically support much prior research indicating that both online and off-line news use are antecedents to political engagement (e.g., Kang & Kwak, 2003). Finally, the surveys relied on self-reported media use and participation, which are susceptible to miscalculations (Prior, 2009), and there may be unavoidable differences between UK and U.S. citizens in self-reporting bias.

Despite these limitations, our study provides unique insights into how citizens in two major democracies engage with news and political processes. Outlining the similarities and differences in these processes provides a strong foundation for future comparative work on the role of media and democracy in these two countries.

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Appendix A*Demographic Profile of the U.S. Survey and Other Comparable Surveys*

	DMRP Study U.S. Survey December 2013 to January 2014 (%)	Pew Research Center for the People & the Press Political Survey July 2013 (%)	U.S. Census American Community Survey 2012 (1-year estimates) (%)
<i>Age</i>			
18-24	5.0	10.1	10.0
25-34	13.5	11.3	13.4
35-44	15.7	11.9	13.0
45-64	43.0	38.8	26.4
65 or older	22.8	28.6	13.7
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	50.0	49.9	49.2
Female	50.0	50.1	50.8
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>			
White	76.2	72.2	73.9
Hispanic	7.5	11.2	16.9
African American	10.5	10.3	12.6
Asian	2.9	2.5	5.0
<i>Education</i>			
High school or less	19.3	32.5	41.6
Some college	34.5	27.6	29.2
Bachelor's degree	30.5	22.6	18.2
Graduate degree	8.8	14.9	10.9
<i>Household income</i>			
Less than \$49,999	46.0	45.9	51.9
\$50,000 to \$99,999	36.5	26.1	32.7
\$100,000 or more	17.4	17.2	15.4

Appendix B*Comparison of the Demographic Profile of the UK Survey to Census Data*

	DMRP Study UK Survey December 2013 to January 2014 (%)	UK Census 2011 ^a (%)
<i>Age</i>		
18–24	5.9	9.3
25–34	18	27.6
35–44	21.5	12.1
45–64	54.3	52.0
65 or older	0.4	16.7
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	44.1	49.4
Female	55.9	50.6
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
White	91.2	86.0
Asian/Asian British	3.6	7.5
Black/African	2.7	3.4
Mixed groups	—	2.2
Other	2.5	1.0
<i>Qualifications</i>		
No qualifications	—	22.7
Level 1	5.2	13.3
Level 2	40.9	15.3
Apprenticeships	—	3.6
Level 3	24.5	12.3
Level 4 and above	29.4	27.2
Other qual.	—	5.7
<i>Household income</i>		
Less than \$49,999	85.4	—
\$50,000 to \$99,999	11.7	—
\$100,000 or more	2.9	—

^a 2011 census for England and Wales.

Note: Dashes are used in cells where data were not obtained or comparable.