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More than popularity matters:
How would voters like to get social networking with candidates?

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Abstract

An online survey was conducted to assess motivations for using, reliance on, and perceived credibility of political blogs and microblogs during both the Taiwanese general election of 2009 (the blog epoch) and the presidential elections of 2012 (the microblog epoch). Results indicated higher reliance on and motivation for using political blogs than microblogs. Blogs were also perceived to be more credible than microblogs. Respondents who primarily engaged in blogging for information purposes were more likely to judge candidate blogs as highly credible, whereas interest in entertainment emerged as the strongest predictor of the perceived credibility of microblogs. This research also provided quantitative evidence showing how users viewed blogs and microblogs differently in the context of political campaigns. The aim is to explore the pros and cons of blogging and microblogging as a tool for political communication.

1. Introduction

Evolving from blogs to microblogs, social media have involved various types of social networking sites (SNSs) to support a variety of uses with different interests and practices. Blogs and microblogs are essentially distinct from each other, however. Blogs feature the function of information sharing with network members. Microblogs like Facebook and Twitter, on the other hand, specialize as platforms for socialization by brief and colloquial posting. Not fully grasping the differences between blogs and microblogs, political candidates tend to presume that a microblog is a more advanced version of social networking than a blog. This research observed the last three elections in Taiwan, and found candidates have largely abandoned their previous blog usage and turned to microblogs, Facebook being the most popular one.

The last three elections in Taiwan reflect the progression of social media from blogs to microblogs. In the 2009 general election, more than 80% of the candidates bypassed creation of an official website and instead used blogs as their form of online communication. We could call that election cycle the "blog epoch."

During the first five-municipality mayoral election of 2010, some candidates began establishing a Facebook page in addition to managing a blog because of the substantial increase in the number of users of microblog-type SNSs. In the 2012 presidential election, the 1.6 million first-time voters were believed to be crucial to the outcome; as a result, all three candidates invested substantial effort into managing Facebook pages since 70.2% of college students were reportedly using Facebook on a daily basis and approximately 60% admitted being addicted to Facebook.[1] While rushing into heavy use of Facebook, the candidates ignored the blogs that they had managed previously. Therefore, this study defined the 2012 Taiwanese presidential election as the "microblog epoch."

This pattern of candidates jumping on the microblog bandwagon raises the question: is a microblog better than a blog for political communication, given the foundational distinctions between the two? Using surveys conducted in the blog epoch and the microblog epoch, it compared users' motivations, reliance on the two platforms, and perceptions of their credibility.

2. Theory

2.1 Social media: The development from blogs to microblogs

The era of social media started about 20 years ago when the early SNS called Open Diary was founded, bringing online diary writers together in a community. The term *blog* was first used around the same time.[2]

With improvements in web technology and Internet bandwidth, microblogs that combined the functions of instant messaging, blogging, and SNSs emerged later and immediately initiated a trend. When blog creator Evan Williams officially introduced Twitter as the world's first microblogging platform, a surge of people in the United States became members. Twitter was followed by the establishment of the renowned microblogs Plurk and Facebook.[3]

Compared with microblogs, blogs offer more space for posting, and all posts are classified with titles or tags that clearly identify the themes. Because users generally have to read the entire posts before offering a comment, blogs are an excellent platform for sharing and exchanging information. In contrast, microblogs feature a chat-like format similar to instant messaging, enabling users to communicate with each other anytime and anywhere. Essentially, blogs are information-oriented and "structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies", but microblogs are socialization-oriented and "structured as personal (or 'egocentric') networks, with the individual at the center of their own community."[4]

2.2 Uses and gratifications

Uses and gratifications was considered highly applicable for examining online media because Internet users, when compared with users of mass media, exhibited activeness in searching for and receiving online messages that closely adhered to the concepts of the paradigm.[5-6] In addition, the Internet was seen as restoring public passions regarding politics by giving citizens' voice a greater role. Johnson and Kaye[7] identified four motivations for consuming political information online: guidance, information seeking/surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. Kaye[8] reported that the motivations for using political blogs were to obtain information, convenience, personal fulfillment, political surveillance, social surveillance, and expression/affiliation.

2.3 Media dependency theory

The media dependency theory proposed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur[9], with a macro level argument to perceive the media system as a crucial component of social structures, maintained that people relied on the system to obtain information and to establish their perception of the external environment. Given their different backgrounds, people's degree of reliance on various forms of media also differs; and they are

typically more concerned with messages conveyed by the media on which they highly depend. Certain studies have shown that people with relatively greater political knowledge tend to rely heavily on newspapers for information.[10-11] Dependence on media was also related to political efficacy and participation. It was determined that the more time people spent reading newspapers or watching television coverage, the higher their level of political participation and efficacy was. Furthermore, the time spent reading newspapers was a stronger predictor than that spent viewing television.[12-13] With its power to offer ample information as well as spaces for public speeches and discussions, the Internet was believed to be more helpful in improving people's political efficacy and participation than newspapers and television. However, empirical evidence on this topic has yielded conflicting results. Some studies showed that the correlation between dependence on the Internet and political efficacy or knowledge was greater than that for traditional media [14-15], whereas other studies found the opposite results.[16]

2.4 Credibility research

The sender's credibility has also been considered important in determining the persuasive effects of information, and credibility was defined as a receiver-based construct. That is, it represented receivers' subjective perception of a message's reliability, as described in multiple dimensions.[17]

Since 1960s, the Roper organization has conducted a series of nationwide surveys that compared public perceptions of credibility for various types of media. The results obtained over the years have been very similar, with television being ranked first, usually followed by newspapers (which occasionally outranked television), radio, and magazines.[18] Without a gatekeeping mechanism, the credibility of online media was in doubt. An early experimental study assessing the depth and fairness of election information on both web pages and television found that 71% of the participants perceived web pages as providing greater depth than television but perceived no difference in fairness. [19] For measuring the credibility of online media, four indicators—believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth—were proposed and have been widely employed.[20-21]

To identify the factors influencing media credibility, scholars suggested user motivation as the assessment criterion, since credibility was viewed as a subjective perception of users and not as a quality of the medium itself.[22] Studies have confirmed that user motivations are a crucial factor in determining online media credibility.[23-25] Moreover, studies also concluded that user dependence also influenced perceptions of media credibility.[26]

This study aims to explore whether microblogging, which has now attained higher popularity than blogging, is actually superior to blogs for political communication. This study also examines the predictive power of motivations and dependence with regard to the credibility of political blogs and microblogs. The research questions are listed below.

Research Question 1: Are the motivations for using political blogs and microblogs significantly different?

Research Question 2: Is the dependence on political blogs and microblogs significantly different?

Research Question 3: Is the credibility of political blogs and microblogs significantly different?

Research Question 4: What is the predictive power of motivations and dependence with regard to the credibility of political blogs and microblogs?

3. Methods

An online survey was conducted to assess motivations for using, dependence on, and perceived credibility of political blogs and microblogs approximately two months prior to both the Taiwanese general election of 2009 (during the blog epoch) and the presidential elections of 2012 (during the microblog epoch). Both survey periods lasted for about four weeks after the surveys were announced. The convenience samples yielded 343 and 368 completed surveys, respectively.

Motivations Motivations for using candidate SNSs were assessed by using 22 statements derived from past studies. Respondents were asked to rate the level of their motivations, using a 5-point scale with 1

indicating "not at all" and 5 indicating "very much." After the data were collected in the first survey, principal component analysis and varimax rotation were used to extract three factors, "information seeking," "political judgment," and "entertainment," which explained 62.67% of the total variance. The same measurement method was used for the second survey.

Dependence The concept of media dependence was defined simply as the frequency with which a specific medium was used.[27] Therefore, one question was developed to measure a respondent's dependence on candidate's SNSs, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (rare) to 5 (often).

Credibility As noted above, four variables (believability, fairness, accuracy, and depth of information) have been used consistently to measure online media credibility. Respondents were asked how believable, fair, accurate, and in-depth they judged political blogs and microblogs to be, using a 5-point scale with 1 indicating "not at all" and 5 indicating "very much."

4. Result

Respondent Profile

In the first survey (the blog epoch), the respondents averaged 26.14 years of age and more males (58.6%) than females (41.4%) had completed the survey. They were well educated, as 87.3% had a college degree or above. In the second survey (the microblog epoch), the average age was 27.11. Slightly more males (51.4%) than females (48.6%) had completed the survey, and 90.19% of the respondents had a college degree or above.

Research Question 1: Are motivations for using political blogs and microblogs significantly different?

Independent sample *t*-tests were used to compare the difference in motivations between users of political blogs and microblogs. The results indicated a significant difference in "information seeking" and "entertainment," but no difference in "political judgment" (Table 1).

Research Question 2: Is the dependence on political blogs and microblogs significantly different?

The results showed a significant difference in the dependence on the political blogs and microblogs (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of motivations and dependence

| | Social Media | | | | 95% CI | | |
| | Blog (n=343) | | Microblog(n=368) | | for Mean | | |
	M	SD	M	SD	Difference	t	df
Motivations							
Information seeking	3.48	.77	3.20	.69	.17, .39	5.12*	687
Political judgment	3.56	.72	3.50	.69	-.05, .16	1.00	701
Entertainment	3.44	.79	2.95	.69	.38, .60	8.52*	680
Dependence	3.48	1.13	2.39	1.10	.92, 1.25	12.97*	702

*$p < 0.05$.

Research Question 3: Is the credibility of political blogs and microblogs significantly different?

The results of an independent *t*-test also indicated a significant difference in judgments of credibility between political blogs and microblogs (Table 2). On all four measures of credibility, the political blogs were rated higher than microblogs. Interestingly, the blogs were deemed higher on believability and fairness of the four indicators, whereas the microblogs received their lowest scores on these two.

Table 2. Comparison of credibility

| | Social Media Blog (n=343) | | Microblog (n=368) | | 95% CI for Mean | | |
	M	SD	M	SD	Difference	t	df
Believability	3.11	.97	2.56	1.00	.39, .70	6.89[*]	586
Fairness	3.14	.92	2.66	.97	.33, .62	6.28[*]	583
Accuracy	3.03	.95	2.72	.99	.15, .46	3.98[*]	586
Depth	3.07	.98	2.79	.92	.12, .42	3.58[*]	609

[*] $p < 0.05$.

Research Question 4: What is the predictive power of motivations and dependence with regard to the credibility of political blogs and microblogs?

The predictive power of motivations and dependence with regard to the credibility of political blogs and microblogs was assessed by a multiple regression analysis (Table 3). As for the credibility of blogs, the predictive power of motivations was significant after controlling for demographics but dependence was not. Among the three motivations, information seeking was the strongest predictor ($b = .67$, $p < .001$), followed by entertainment ($b = .60$, $p < .001$) and political judgment ($b = .52$, $p < .001$). The motivations explain between 19.7% and 37.2% of the blogs' credibility.

With regard to the credibility of microblogs, the predictive power of both dependence and motivations was significant, and the power of motivations was stronger than that of dependence, after controlling for demographic variables. Among the three motivations, entertainment was the strongest predictor ($b = 1.00$, $p < .001$), followed by information seeking ($b = .72$, $p < .001$) and political judgment ($b = .49$, $p < .001$). The combination of dependence and motivations explain between 29.8% and 77.4% of the microblogs' credibility.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis of predictors for credibility

| | Blog | | | Microblog | | |
	Reg. 1	Reg. 2	Reg. 3	Reg. 1	Reg. 2	Reg. 3
Gender	.16[*]	.11	.13	.08	.08	.00
Age	.00	.00	.00	.00	.01	.00
R^2	.009	.009	.009	.011	.011	.011
Dependence	.05	.03	.04	.11[**]	.19[***]	.00
Info Seeking	.67[***]			.72[***]		
Political Judgment		.52[***]			.49[***]	
Entertainment			.60[***]			1.0[***]
R^2	.379	.207	.324	.441	.306	.776
Adjusted R^2	.372	.197	.316	.435	.298	.774
Sig. of Change	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

[*] $p < 0.05$; [**] $p < 0.01$; [***] $p < 0.001$.

5. Conclusion

From the political science perspective, factors affecting voter preferences and voting behaviors include psychological factors such as party identification or party spirit, as proposed by the Michigan School [28], and environmental factors such as the influence of a community, as proposed by the Columbia School. [29]

"Community" here refers to a network of people who frequently discuss politics together, and it has been described as the most influential variable affecting voters' political behaviors. [30] Social media platforms seem to be an ideal tool for campaigning, since they not only function as a channel for message transmission but also facilitate the establishment of virtual communities. SNSs have developed into various forms. Not recognizing the essential differences, campaigns have tended to apply social media in accordance with their level of popularity, adopting blogs first and then flocking to microblogs, mostly Facebook. This research has explored how voters use and perceive these two types of social media as sources of political information—a consideration that matters far more than pure numerical popularity.

The findings indicated higher dependence on and motivations for using political blogs than microblogs. The various possible reasons for this preference are stated hereafter. Blog posts are sorted by date or topic, which facilitates browsing. In contrast, Facebook posts are rapidly superseded by the numerous posts that follow chronologically. Searching for information on Facebook is not very convenient. Moreover, multiple regression results showed that respondents who primarily engaged in blogging for information purposes were more likely to perceive blogs as highly credible, whereas entertainment interests emerged as the strongest predictor for judgments of microblog credibility. The findings are encouraging: people seriously motivated by a desire for reliable information indeed find political blogs to be credible sources for their inquiry. Those who prefer entertainment are more likely to consider candidate information on Facebook credible.

This study suggests that campaigns should not blindly abandon a blog and use a certain type of social media exclusively on the basis of its overall popularity. Some people may believe that blogs will soon become extinct since microblogs have grown so popular, but this perception is somewhat overgeneralized. Blogs and microblogs illuminate the diversity of social media. The two categories differ in nature, and neither one can replace the other.

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