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The politics of "Unfriending": User filtration in response to political disagreement on social media

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ABSTRACT

This article examines exposure to political disagreement on social media and user filtration in response to it. Popular arguments suggest that social media sites prevent exposure to political disagreement either through algorithmic filtration or selective affiliation. Another popular argument says that when users are exposed to political disagreement on social media, they filter it from their feeds by "unfriending"/"unfollowing" or "hiding" the author. We put these narratives to the test by examining (a) the relationship between social media use and exposure to political disagreement and (b) the factors that predict user filtration in response to political disagreement. Results from analysis based on a nationally representative sample of Colombian adults in urban areas show that (a) engagement with news and public affairs content on social media is positively associated with exposure to political disagreement and (b) the amount of disagreement users are exposed to is not related to user filtration in response.

1. Introduction

The current communication environment is characterized by information abundance, coupled with the possibility of increased selectivity and tailoring of information diets in accordance with pre-existing beliefs (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). These trends have led some to argue that digital communication technologies have ushered a new era in which like-minded people are more connected with each other and disconnected from diverse others, creating "echo-chambers" that result in increased political polarization (Sunstein, 2007) or political entrenchment (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008) and hinder collective decision-making processes.

On social media, information is filtered in several possible ways. For example, Facebook (and soon, Twitter) employs *algorithmic filtration* to increase the visibility of some content at the expense of other. These sites also afford users the ability to filter content themselves, either in the preventative sense by constructing homogeneous online social networks (i.e., *selective affiliation*) or in the reactive sense by culling specific people from their networks after content exposure. Called "unfriending" or "unfollowing," these behaviors and others contribute to *post-hoc user filtration*, that is, user filtration in response to social media content.

Both kinds of *social media filtration* have become the subject of public conversation. One common argument (e.g., Pariser, 2011) says that social media sites employ algorithms that limit exposure to undesirable content, including *political disagreement*. A second story suggests that through selective affiliation, people avoid connecting with others who don't think the same as they do (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2013; Sunstein, 2007), therefore limiting the possibility for disagreement to occur within social networks. A third narrative (e.g., Corasaniti, 2015) tells us that when users are exposed to political disagreement on social media, they filter it from their feeds by "unfriending"/"unfollowing"[1] the author or by "hiding" the author's posts.[2]

We aim to put these narratives to the test by examining (1) the relationship between social media use and exposure to political disagreement and (2) whether people actively avoid disagreement

[1] The term "unfollowing" means different things on different sites. On Twitter, "unfollowing" means to sever a connection with another user. But on Facebook, "unfollow" means to "hide" another user's posts. To avoid confusion, we use the term "unfollowing" for Twitter and the term "hiding" for Facebook.

[2] The third and most drastic form of user filtration is called "blocking." Not only does this action sever the connection between two users, it also prevents future reconnection or interaction.

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by filtering it from their social media feed. To do so, we rely on a representative survey sample of adults in urban areas in Colombia, a country with a polarized public sphere in which social media play an increasingly important role in reconnecting people with democratic institutions in the wake of a prolonged period of political and drug-related violence.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social media and political disagreement

Before examining user filtration in response to political disagreement, it is first necessary to examine whether social media expose users to political disagreement in the first place. Whether through user volition (i.e., because users engage in selective affiliation) or not (i.e., through algorithmic filtration), do social media filter out disagreeable information before exposure is possible?

While it might be tempting to assume that selective affiliation on social media precludes exposure to disagreement, there is little evidence to support the idea that selectivity occurs only along political lines (Aiello et al., 2012). Rather, social media networks typically contain overlapping and crisscrossing layers of social ties (Brundidge, 2010; Messing & Westwood, 2012) that often come from multiple geographic locations (Takhteyev, Gruzd, & Wellman, 2012). Furthermore, internet users generally do not avoid cross-cutting information online (Garrett, 2009); some evidence even shows that interpersonal recommendations trump ideological cues in social media settings (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Thus, selective affiliation on social media does not completely counteract the diversification of communication within egocentric networks—in fact it may actually promote communicative diversification and, along with it, increase the likelihood that users will be exposed to political disagreement.

Recent evidence supports this idea, including several studies based on “big data” collected directly from social media platforms themselves. For example, a recent study conducted by Facebook on its users—dubbed the ‘Its Not Our Fault’ study by prominent American media organizations—shows that most Facebook users are exposed to news and political opinion from both sides of the ideological spectrum (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). But despite the tongue-in-cheek public reaction to this study, it is but the latest in a growing body of evidence that points toward a similar conclusion. For example, a study of politically involved Twitter users also shows evidence of exposure to crosscutting political information (Barbera, 2014; but see; Conover et al., 2011). Meanwhile, surveys collected in various populations around the world generally show positive correlations between social media use and exposure to political disagreement (Barnidge, 2015; Kim, 2011; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). Thus, the preponderance of empirical evidence suggests that social media promote, rather than prevent, exposure to political disagreement.

Prevailing theory suggests that exposure to disagreement occurs because social media diversify communication within egocentric networks through the articulation of weak tie relationships and the promotion of information sharing (Barbera, 2014; Barnidge, 2015; Brundidge, 2010; Kim et al., 2013; Rojas, 2015). Social media expose people to more information from a broader array of sources. It follows from this observation that people who are more engaged with political information on social media will be more likely to perceive political disagreement. Thus, if social media promote exposure to disagreement, it is because they promote engagement with social conversations about political information.

Social media provide new spaces for users to engage with politics and public affairs (Papacharissi, 2009). For example, recent literature highlights the ease with which people use them to organize for political protest (Eltantawy & Weist, 2011; Harlow, 2012; Howard & Parks, 2012; Lim, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012), and the new ways they promote political messaging (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Other literature emphasizes the enhanced capacity for monitoring social opinion about public issues (Schulz & Roessler, 2012). These kinds of behaviors, reading and messaging about public affairs, have been shown to be associated with political learning (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003), cognitive reflection (Cho et al., 2009), and political participation (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Moreover, one kind of engagement often occurs in tandem with other forms, and online communication habits often influence political behavior outside of the immediate environment (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

Prior literature on political disagreement (e.g., Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004; Mutz, 2006) treats it as the product of informal discussions about politics. In their ability to facilitate these kinds of political conversations, social media differ little from face-to-face settings (Kim, 2011), although recent findings suggest they are somewhat uncommon (Hampton et al., 2014). But on social media, users can get a sense of what others think and feel without directly engaging in a conversation or discussion (see, e.g., Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, & Anthony, 2010), and therefore interaction is not necessary to experience disagreement (Schulz & Roessler, 2012) because users don't have to comment on or discuss others' posts in order to perceive that they have encountered disagreement. Instead, people may engage with other user's opinions as if they were participating in the conversation even when they are “lurking” on the sideline, and these behaviors may promote the same social-psychological processes that result in the perception of political difference (Barnidge, 2015; Schulz & Roessler, 2012). Therefore, we expect that (H1) engagement with politics and public affairs on social media will be positively associated with encountering political disagreement on social media.

With this hypothesis in mind, additional comments are warranted at this point to address counterarguments based on the filter bubble argument (i.e., *algorithmic filtration*). This argument suggests that the algorithms social media sites (especially Facebook) employ may filter out disagreeable posts, along with other undesirable content (Nikolov, Oliviera, Flammini, & Menczer, 2015; Pariser, 2011). The filtration system learns what is desirable to each user through that user's activity on the site (Pariser, 2011). According to this logic, social media users would not be exposed to disagreement unless they engage with it. But the idea that engagement with news promotes exposure to disagreement is entirely consistent with the argument presented here. In fact, we predict that engagement contributes to the perception of political disagreement. And despite the possibility that some content is filtered out of user's feeds, prior evidence still shows a relationship between social media use and exposure to disagreement (Bakshy et al., 2015).

2.2. Political disagreement and post-hoc user filtration

A second question relates to users' behavior *after* exposure to political disagreement. Do they remove or hide social media connections in response to political disagreement? Prior research on post-hoc user filtration–called “interpersonal boundary regulation” by some (Wisniewski, Wilson, & Richter-Lipford, 2011) and “homophily in friend retention” by others (Noel & Nyhan, 2011), shows that it doesn't occur very often (Kramer, Hoffman, & Eimler, 2015). In fact, most people maintain connections with dispensable friends despite the fact that they can think of reasons to sever connection with them.

However, when post-hoc user filtration does occur, it is more

likely if the other user is a weak tie or old friend (Malinen, 2015; Sibona, 2014). Whatever the immediate motivation, unfriending or hiding is more likely if the connection is not socially close. Based on this research, it seems reasonable to expect that number of social media friends will be positively associated with user filtration as a response to political disagreement on social media (H2) because larger social networks contain weaker ties (e.g., Hampton, Sessions, & Her, 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Other evidence suggests that platform literacy matters for user filtration (Wisniewski et al., 2011). That is, users must be familiar with the platform's filtration options and norms of use before they call fully regulate the boundaries of their online social networks. Assuming that heavier users are more literate with social media platforms than non-users, it is therefore also reasonable to expect that time spent on social media will be positively associated with user filtration as a response to political disagreement on social media (H3).

While prior research has not examined post-hoc user filtration as a narrowly construed response to political disagreement, research about other motivations has some important implications that lead to concrete predictions about that specific response. For example, this research shows that common reasons for unfriending or hiding include posting unimportant or polarizing content (Sibona & Walczak, 2011) and/or low social attractiveness (Peña & Brody, 2014).

The first implication this research has for the specific case of post-hoc filtration as a response to political disagreement is that the content people post matters when it comes to unfriending and/or hiding. Evidence suggests that users don't react well to content that reflects poorly on the poster and/or content that is controversial. For some, the public expression of disagreement certainly has the potential to meet both of these criteria. Research shows that political disagreement makes some people uncomfortable (Mutz, 2006), and that it isn't always considered appropriate to express in public or semi-public settings (Eliasoph, 1998; Walsh, 2004). Recent evidence suggests this may the case on social media, especially Facebook (Hampton et al., 2014). Based on this logic, we expect that the more political disagreement to which a social media user is exposed, the more likely they will be to engage in user filtration in response (H4). Given our expectations about engagement with news content and the perception of disagreement, we also expect that intensity of social media engagement will be positively associated with user filtration as a response to political disagreement (H5).

Finally, people with strong ideologies are typically less tolerant of opposing views (e.g., Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Gieling, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2014). Therefore, we expect that strength of political ideology will be positively associated with user filtration as a response to political disagreement on social media (H6).

3. Context of study

This study examines the relationships outlined above among Colombian adults in urban areas. Colombia has a formal multiparty democracy and a centrist news media system that is closely aligned with big business interests (Waisbord, 2008). But recently, the rapid adoption of social media (Bennett, 2012) has contributed to the emergence of a vibrant new sphere for political communication in which ideologically slanted views are more commonly expressed. Much of this ideologically driven discourse has revolved around sharp divisions on the issue of whether to reach a peaceable end to the conflict with armed rebels, including the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), or whether to pursue a military end to the conflict. This combination of increased public tension based on political division and increased reliance on social media make Colombia an ideal scenario to explore how social media users respond to political disagreement.

4. Method

4.1. Description of data

This study relies on survey data collected from August 29 to September 17 of 2012, in 10 cities in Colombia, by the Universities of Wisconsin and Externado de Colombia, as part of their biennial study of communication and political attitudes in Colombia. The sample was designed to represent Colombia's adult urban population—75% of Colombia's 46 million inhabitants live in urban areas (DANE, 2012). Survey respondents were selected using a multi-step stratified random sample procedure that selected households randomly, based on city size and census data. Once the number of households was allocated for a given city, a number of city blocks were selected randomly according to housing district and strata. Then, individual households were randomly selected within each block. Finally, the study used the "adult in the household who most recently celebrated a birthday" technique to identify an individual respondent at random. Up to three visits to each household were made (if needed) to increase participation in the survey. A local professional polling firm, Deproyectos Limitada, collected the data and 1031 face-to-face completed responses were obtained for a response rate of 83%.[3]

Since the focus of our study is to examine the dynamics of political disagreement and friendship dissolution in social media, we restricted our sample to active users of social media. We only included those who have a social media account, use social media more than 1 min per week, and have more than one friend on social media. Of the 1031 total respondents, 460 were identified as active social media users and included in the analysis.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Post-hoc user filtration

To assess whether social media users engage in post-hoc user filtration, we asked participants whether they have ever either hidden someone's comments from their social media feed or removed others from their friend list on social media due to difference in political viewpoints. (Yes = 19.6%, No = 80.4%). These two items are positively correlated (r = 0.63).

4.2.2. Social media disagreement

The approach to measuring disagreement on social media adopts a broad scope in terms of assessing not just whether respondents actively engage with disagreement through discussion, but also how often a respondent encounters political disagreement on social media, we asked, "How often do you disagree with the political opinions your friends post on Facebook or other online social network?" The item is measured with five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.1$).

4.2.3. Social media engagement

We constructed the social media engagement variable by combining four items indicating participants' level of news-related behavior on social media. Items asked how frequently participants (a) express their views on current issues, (b) share news stories with their contacts, (c) mobilize their contacts about social or political causes, and (d) read news articles posted by their contacts. All items are measured with six-point Likert-type scales ranging from

[3] Response rate calculated using AAPOR guidelines (RR1).

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Variable	*M*	*SD*
Age	31.3	10.9
Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Gender		
Female	240	52.2%
Male	220	47.8%
Education		
None	1	0.2%
Incomplete primary school	5	1.1%
Complete primary school	4	0.9%
Incomplete secondary school	37	8.0%
Complete secondary school	155	33.7%
Incomplete college	130	28.3%
College graduate	103	22.4%
Graduate school or more	25	5.4%
Variable	**Median Range (CP)**	**Median Range (USD)**
Monthly Household Income (Colombian Peso)	$1,001,000.00 − $2,000,000.00	$344.00–$685.00
N	460	

Notes. CP = Colombian Peso. USD = United States Dollar. *M* = mean. *SD* = standard deviation.

0 (never) to 5 (frequently) ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.4$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$).

4.2.4. Time spent on social media

We used an open-ended question to ask respondents how much time per day they spent using Facebook or other social media in the past week ($M = 272.3$ min, $SD = 318.8$). The final variable was log-transformed.

4.2.5. Number of social media contacts

We used an open-ended question to ask participants how many contacts or friends they have on social media ($M = 250.4$, $SD = 354.9$). As with time spent on social media, the final variable was log-transformed.

4.2.6. Strength of political ideology

We constructed a folded scale to measure strength of political ideology (Garrett & Stroud, 2014; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Using a single survey item measured political ideology using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right) ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 1.9$), we computed the absolute deviation from the political ideology scale midpoint (5). The two opposite ends of political ideology spectrum were recoded to indicate strong political ideology (5) and the center point of political ideology measure was recoded to denote weak political ideology (0) ($M = 1.3$, $SD = 1.5$).

4.2.7. Political talk network diversity

We measured a respondent's political talk network diversity by using four items by following questions: “How often do you talk about news or politics with people who (a) have very different ideas from your own, (b) are from the left (or the right), (c) are from a different social stratum from you, and (d) are from a very different age from yours.” The response scale ranges from 0 (never) to 5 (often) ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.4$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$).

4.2.8. Demographics

We include a series of demographic variables in order to control their potential effects in the model. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics of age, gender, education, and household income of the respondents.

5. Results

5.1. Social media and political disagreement

We first examined the extent to which people are exposed to political disagreement on social media. Of the 460 respondents who identified as social media users, the vast majority of the respondents (74.8%) have experienced at least some political disagreement on social media, and 15.4% of the respondents reported they almost always or always experience political disagreement on social media. On the other hand, 25.2% indicated that they have never encountered political disagreement on social media. These descriptive findings suggest that exposure to disagreement on social media is a relatively common experience. Zero-order correlations of all variables included in the model are presented in Table 2.

To test the first hypothesis, we specified an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model in which social media disagreement was regressed on number of friends, time spent on social media, and intensity of social media engagement along with other control variables.[4] The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. As predicted in H1, we found positive relationship between social media engagement and social media disagreement ($B = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = 0.001$): Using social media as a platform for sharing and consuming news and discussing social issues would increase exposure to politically disagreeable information on social media. In addition, education level was positively associated with social media disagreement ($B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.029$).

5.2. Social media user filtration

The next set of hypotheses concerns the factors relating to post-hoc user filtration. When we asked respondents whether they have ever filtered out their social media contacts due to political disagreement, almost 20% of the respondents (90 out of 460) reported that they have either hidden other people's comments or

[4] We compared a parsimonious model that only has demographic variables with this full model. The change in the amount of explained variance is significant ($F(5, 394) = 3.45$, $p = 0.005$).

Table 2
Zero-order correlations.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age										
2. Female	−0.07 (0.148)									
3. Education	0.19 (0.000)	−0.03 (0.523)								
4. Income	0.21 (0.000)	0.10 (0.031)	0.44 (0.000)							
5. Strength of Political Ideology	−0.02 (0.736)	0.00 (0.969)	0.00 (0.941)	−0.10 (0.038)						
6. Offline Network Diversity	0.00 (0.936)	0.04 (0.442)	0.15 (0.002)	0.07 (0.159)	0.09 (0.074)					
7. Number of Social Media Contacts	−0.21 (0.000)	0.03 (0.463)	−0.05 (0.245)	0.01 (0.778)	0.02 (0.737)	−0.01 (0.848)				
8. Social Media Time	−0.19 (0.000)	0.07 (0.109)	−0.06 (0.192)	−0.06 (0.186)	0.04 (0.425)	0.07 (0.135)	0.14 (0.003)			
9. Social Media Disagreement	0.05 (0.275)	-0.03 (0.585)	0.17 (0.000)	0.12 (0.014)	0.04 (0.396)	0.12 (0.008)	0.01 (0.791)	−0.03 (0.54)		
1. Social Media Engagement	−0.09 (0.042)	0.04 (0.411)	0.10 (0.025)	0.06 (0.208)	0.00 (0.991)	0.20 (0.000)	0.20 (0.000)	0.20 (0.000)	0.18 (0.000)	
11. Disagreement Expression	0.04 (0.35)	0.02 (0.679)	0.11 (0.021)	0.15 (0.001)	−0.12 (0.018)	0.13 (0.004)	0.04 (0.425)	−0.06 (0.171)	0.14 (0.003)	0.24 (0.000)

Note. p-values are reported in parenthesis.

Table 3
The predictors of exposure to political disagreement on social media.

Independent Variable	B (SE)	β	P-value
Intercept	1.67 (0.45)		0.000
Age	0.00 (0.01)	0.01	0.797
Female	−0.12 (0.11)	−0.06	0.259
Education	0.12 (0.05)	0.12	0.029
Income	0.03 (0.04)	0.03	0.536
Strength of Political Ideology	0.03 (0.04)	0.05	0.352
Offline Network Diversity	0.06 (0.04)	0.08	0.105
Number of Social Media Contacts[a]	−0.00 (0.04)	0.00	0.926
Social Media Time[a]	−0.08 (0.05)	−0.08	0.118
Social Media Engagement	0.13 (0.04)	0.17	0.001
R^2	0.07		0.000
Adjusted R^2	0.05		0.000
N	404		

Note 1. Cell entries are unstandardized beta coefficients (B) with standard errors in parentheses (SE), along with standardized coefficients (β), from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.
Note 2. [a]log-transformed variables.

Table 4
The predictors of user filtration as a response to political disagreement on social media.

Independent Variable	B (SE)	Odds-Ratio	P-value
Intercept	−7.98 (1.79)	0.00	0.000
Age	0.01 (0.02)	1.01	0.399
Female	0.26 (0.31)	1.30	0.396
Education	0.11 (0.17)	1.11	0.519
Income	−0.05 (0.12)	0.95	0.687
Strength of Political Ideology	0.32 (0.10)	1.37	0.001
Offline Network Heterogeneity	−0.03 (0.12)	0.97	0.820
Number of Social Media Contacts[a]	0.29 (0.14)	1.34	0.037
Social Media Time[a]	0.58 (0.17)	1.79	0.001
Social Media Engagement	0.05 (0.12)	1.06	0.654
Social Media Political Disagreement	0.15 (0.21)	1.16	0.464
McFadden Pseudo-R^2	0.11		
N	306		

Note 1. Cell entries are beta coefficients (B) with standard errors in parentheses (SE) from logistic regression (logit) where 1 = User engaged in post-hoc user filtration and 0 = User not engaged in post-hoc user filtration.
Note 2. [a]log-transformed variables.
Note 3. Analysis conducted among respondents exposed to at least some disagreement.

unfriended others because they do not share political views, suggesting social media filtering is not a rare behavior among social media users, but neither is it typical.

To examine the factors relating to post-hoc user filtration, we specified a logistic regression model where 1 = User who engages in post-hoc filtration and 0 = User who does not. Level of social media disagreement was included as a predictor, as well as the same set of control variables and covariates in the previous model.[5] Results are shown in Table 4. As predicted in H2 and H3, number of social media contacts and time spent on social media were both positively related with the likelihood of engaging in post-hoc user filtration (B = 0.29, SE = 0.14, p = 0.037; B = 0.58, SE = 0.17, p = 0.001, respectively). However, there was no statistically significant relationship between level of political disagreement and post-hoc user filtration (B = 0.15, SE = 0.21, p = 0.464) or between social media engagement and post-hoc user filtration (B = 0.05, SE = 0.12, p = 0.654). Thus, the evidence leads us to reject H4 and H5. Finally, as predicted in H8, strength of political ideology showed significant positive relationship with post-hoc user filtration (B = 0.32, SE = 0.10, p = 0.001).

6. Discussion

Whether social media promote or limit exposure to political disagreement—and how people respond to it when they are exposed to it—has been a topic of debate among scholars and media professionals alike (e.g., Brundidge, 2010; Corasaniti, 2015; Flaxman et al., 2013). Despite concerns about algorithmic filtration and selective affiliation (Sunstein, 2007; Pariser, 2011), a growing body of evidence suggests social media expose people to more diverse political information (Bakshy et al., 2015; Barbera, 2014; Barnidge, 2015; Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014), and that people do not necessarily avoid cross-cutting information when they encounter it (Garrett, 2009; Messing & Westwood, 2012). Similar to this prior research, the present study examines social media use and exposure to political disagreement. But unlike these prior studies, we take one step farther by

[5] We compared a parsimonious model that only has demographic variables with this full model. The change in the residual deviance is significant −32.03 (p < 0.000). Other indicators of model fit also suggest the full model is better than the parsimonious model: McFadden's Pseudo R^2: 0.01 (parsimonious model), 0.11 (full model) and AIC: 334.17 (parsimonious model), 293.47 (full model).

examining an outcome of disagreement: Post-hoc user filtration in response to political disagreement on social media.

The first set of findings—those related to exposure to political disagreement on social media—generally support the expectations of the study. The findings suggest that algorithmic filtration and selective affiliation are not sufficient to prevent exposure to disagreement; instead, social media algorithms may actually increase the chances of seeing political disagreement, particularly if users are engaged with news and public affairs content on social media (see also, Barnidge, 2015; Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2013). We found exposure to political disagreement increases as people use social media for consuming, sharing, and commenting about the news and/or public affairs information. This finding also implies people who do not use social media for those purposes might have less chance to encounter political disagreement. Finally, although social media networks are closely related to the makeup of offline social networks (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), users larger or more diverse offline networks do not report exposure to more disagreement in these data. Therefore, the most important factors related to exposure, regardless of offline network characteristics, are specific social media-based behaviors that increase the chances of experiencing it.

The second set of findings—those related to user filtration as a response to political disagreement—is largely contrary to our expectations. Neither engagement nor level of disagreement exposure is significantly related to filtering out political disagreement on social media. The most engaged users, who experience the most political disagreement, are not any more likely to filter it from their information feeds than less-engaged users. People don't necessarily choose social ties based on politics (Brundidge, 2010; Gaines & Mondak, 2009; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), and they generally want to maintain their online friendships despite differences (Kramer et al., 2015). The absence of these relationships echoes Garrett's argument that people do not necessarily avoid counter-attitudinal information (2009), and this non-finding gives an important insight into how social media diversifies communication within social networks.

These findings relate idea of egocentric publics (Rojas & Macafee, 2013; Rojas, 2015; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011), which suggests that public and political engagement increasingly revolves around social connections with others that are reliant upon or facilitated by online social platforms. This idea implies that social media are becoming important platforms for political communication in modern democracies, and that the nature and content of socio-political information on social media increasingly shape people's perceptions of the public and public opinion. The current findings suggest that (a) social media do not completely filter out political disagreement before exposure is possible, and (b) social media users do not necessarily unfriend, unfollow, or hide people when they encounter more political disagreement. Therefore, if social media largely shape people's perceptions of the public, it follows that those perceptions may give the impression of a public sphere that is simultaneously diverse and hostile—one that accommodates a variety of viewpoints but one in which those viewpoints often clash with user's own opinions. These kinds of perceptions could lead to a variety of outcomes, including but not limited to “corrective” action aimed at rectifying public wrongs through expression or political participation (Rojas et al., 2016; Rojas, 2010).

Although we did not find a significant relationship between the level of political disagreement and post-hoc user filtration, we found other that factors are related to user filtration as a response to political disagreement. First, social media users with more contacts are more likely to filter in response to political disagreement. This finding fits with previous research showing that weak ties are more likely to be unfriended (Malinen, 2015; Sibona, 2014). Essentially, our measure of social media contacts captures the extent to which user's networks are composed of weak tie relationships, as larger networks typically contain more weak ties (Hampton et al., 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). We suspect that weak ties are more likely to be filtered from social networks because severing weak ties relationships probably carries less social cost and causes less social anxiety than severing strong tie relationships (Sibona & Walczak, 2011).

We also found that users who spend more time on social media are more likely to engage in post-hoc user filtration. Users who spend more time on social media are probably more literate with those platforms, and media literacy has been shown to increase the likelihood of engaging in post-hoc user filtration as a form of boundary maintenance for personal networks (Wisniewski et al., 2011). Users who are more literate with specific social media platforms are more aware of their filtration capabilities.

Finally, people with strong political ideologies are more likely to engage in post-hoc user filtration, probably because they are less tolerant of opposing viewpoints (Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Gieling et al., 2014). While political disagreement has been shown to increase understanding of cross-cutting views (Mutz, 2006), these effects seem unlikely to occur if users filter disagreement from their networks whenever it occurs. The act of filtering someone from their networks may even reduce political tolerance, and more research is needed to investigate the relationship between user filtration in response to political disagreement and its consequences for tolerance of oppositional views.

This study is limited by self-reported measures for political disagreement and related interactions, as well as the reduction in sample size in the social media users subset. Additionally, while the purpose of the study is to examine a very specific motivation for user filtration, the measure of post-hoc user filtration may be limited in its ability to capture reactions to broader conversations with “political” implications that do not necessarily involve political disagreement. Our measure may underestimate some political user filtration that caused by other political behavior on social media, such as uncivil conversation and intense discussion, or disinterest in politics. While the broad approach to measuring political disagreement is in line with previous literature (Barnidge, 2015; Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2013), the relationships assessed in this study could differ if questions about exposure to political disagreement were more narrowly worded to reflect active engagement through discussion. This study is also limited in its ability to make causal claims. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, any interpretation of results that implies a causal relationship should be undertaken with caution. Ideally, future research would analyze these relationships with panel survey data measuring exposure to disagreement and post-hoc user filtration over time. Finally, these results are limited in their generalizability to non-Colombian contexts, and extending their implications to other contexts should be done with caution. The results are best compared to other semi-developed, emerging democracies with presidential, multiparty political systems and centrist news media institutions.

Despite these limitations, this study has provided relatively strong evidence that (a) social media do no prevent exposure to political disagreement—in fact they may promote disagreement for some users—and (b) social media users do not necessarily filter out disagreeable contacts as they are exposed to more political disagreement. These results paint a relatively optimistic picture of the potential for social media to diversify public communication within social networks, but it also implies that the social media sphere may contribute to perceptions of public polarization or combativeness.

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