WEB, NEWS, AND POLITICAL TRUST: THE CONTRAST BETWEEN VIRTUAL ENTERTAINMENT AND ONLINE NEWS SOURCES

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Abstract:

What is the connection between Web use and political trust? To address this inquiry, we played out a cross-sectional investigation of Euro barometer review information connected with 27 nations and a directed feeling examination of online political data broadcast during the Italian discussion on the change of public subsidizing of gatherings. The outcomes reveal the distinctions between Web 1.0 sites and Web 2.0 web-based entertainment, showing that utilization of information from data/news sites is emphatically connected with higher trust, while admittance to data accessible via web-based entertainment is connected with lower trust. This has suggestions for the discussion via online entertainment as an open arena and for the strain among expert and resident news coverage.

Keywords: Web, New Media, Web-based Entertainment, Reporting, Political Trust, Opinion Investigation, Journalistic prejudice.

Introduction:

Citizens in Western democracies seem to be affected, even recently, by a malaise toward their political systems (e.g., Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014; Moy, Pfau & Kahlor, 1999; but see: Norris, 2011). Scholars started to investigate the determinants of trust in political institutions to shed light on the reasons behind the fall in their legitimacy and have shown that the news media play a role (Avery, 2009; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012; Moy, Pfau & Kahlor, 1999; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2000, 2011; Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012). This role seems particularly crucial because 'users of particular media tend to perceive democratic institutions as depicted by these sources' (Moy, Pfau & Kahlor, 1999: 139) and make their judgments accordingly. The advent of social media and social network sites (SNS) in the Web 2.0 era, however, has reopened the debate on whether the Internet can become an uncoerced public sphere (Benkler, 2006; Lewis, 2012: 848; Papacharissi, 2002) that provides room for e-democracy (Hilbert, 2009), deliberation, and the unmediated diffusion of news (Hermida, 2010) enhancing responsiveness and accountability of political institutions. So far, scholars reported controversial results on the relationship between Internet and democracy (for a review: Boulliane, 2009) and it is uncertain whether Internet usage promotes democratic support or not. This paper tries to answer this puzzle by evaluating the relationship between the consumption of online news and a citizen's propensity to express trust in political institutions. Taking the cue from previous studies (e.g., Bailard, 2012; Im et al., 2014), we deepen the analysis by focusing on the consumption of political information and distinguishing the impact of Web 1.0 information/news websites, i.e., online versions of traditional media outlets and institutional websites that follow a top-down approach, from that of Web 2.0 social media, i.e., independent blogs and unmediated interactive social network sites that favor bottom-up dynamics. In this light, we argue that the consumption of information from news websites relies on a top-down format that mimics that of traditional media. This stream of news is driven by

political elites (Hindman, 2009) and promotes democratic support and political trust. Conversely, the unmediated nature of social media along with its bottom-up structure favor the circulation of alternative information that challenges the viewpoints of traditional media and negatively affects trust in political institutions. We test our hypotheses through a multimethod strategy. On the one hand, we carry out a statistical analysis on data from a Eurobarometer survey held in November 2012 across 27 European countries. On the other, we perform an in-depth case study analysis that takes advantage of supervised sentiment analysis (Hopkins & King, 2010) to track differences between news media and social media in the debate over the reform of public funding of political parties after the Italian political scandals that took place in mid-2012. The results confirm our hypotheses and shed light on the differences between mediated and unmediated sources of information, warning against the potential shortcoming of e-democracy. The paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the relationship between news media and political trust. Section three summarizes the literature on the Internet and democracy and then describes our theoretical framework and hypotheses. Section four tests the hypotheses through analysis of survey data. Section five substantiates the findings by means of supervised sentiment analysis of the Italian case. Section six concludes.

News media and trust in political institutions

The media are the lens through which citizens gather political information on the performance of political institutions and adjust their attitude accordingly. Scholars proposed contrasting theories about media effect on political trust (for a review: Aarts, Fladmoe & Strömbäck, 2012). On the one hand, the video malaise theory (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005) suggests that the negativity of media, along with the coverage of politics as horse race, generate cynicism and 'malaise' that decrease trust in political institutions. On the other hand, the virtuous circle theory posits that media exposure can produce a virtuous circle that increases civic engagement, political interest, and trust in government (Norris, 2000, 2011; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Norris (2000) suggests that the availability of political information provided by the media increases the trust among users that access those contents, while it has no effects on apathetic citizens that are unwilling to follow political news. The consumption of news media will have a positive effect on democracy and the exposure to political news will produce a virtuous circle of trust in democratic institutions (Avery, 2009; Norris, 2000). Media provide citizens with information useful to evaluate the output of political institutions and make informed choices. However, citizens are also sensitive to how media slant political news, and this can alter their political trust and evaluation of political institutions. As such, the content of political information available to the citizens must be taken into account. Although news media are often perceived as independent watchdogs able to monitor those in power (Martin, 2008), many factors can prevent them from behaving this way (Norris, 2011). Several scholars note that the news media are characterized by deference to authority (for a review: Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995). These studies suggest that media outlets tend to favor the topics and interpretations proposed by government officials and to neglect alternative voices (Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston, 2007), thereby supporting the status quo (Soloski, 1989). For instance, news media can slant their reports to further democratic support, driving media users to feel that institutions are honest, responsive and accountable, which increases political trust. Indeed, bias in media is

often induced by political institutions such as governments that have an intrinsic interest in promoting their viewpoints to build support for the regime (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012). The same happens when actors like owners, editors, advertisers, lobbyists, or journalists, i.e., the political elite, are the source of bias (Hanitzsch & Berganza, 2012). Even when media slant their news to address the preferences and tastes of groups of consumers (e.g., Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010), media tend to offer a perspective that is less polarized than the ideology of their audience. Empirical studies reveal that only few outlets give room to extremist voices, while the majority broadcasts moderate centrist views (Ceron & Memoli, 2015a; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011; Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012) that are not hostile to the political mainstream and foster trust in incumbent democratic institutions. As such, the diffusion of political news, per se, can increase political trust, particularly when the political elite (e.g., governments, editors, journalists) exploits the top-down approach of traditional media outlets to slant news and broadcast viewpoints that sustain the democratic regime and the societal status quo (Woodly, 2008). Indeed, recent studies based on European countries show that the consumption of news from traditional media outlets is associated with higher confidence in political institutions and higher satisfaction with democracy (Ceron & Memoli, 2015b; Norris, 2011), particularly when the content broadcast by such organizations is slanted to support the political status quo (Aarts, Fladmoe & Strömbäck, 2012; Ceron & Memoli, 2015a).

News websites, social media and democracy

The Internet revolution has opened the debate on the effects of new media, separating euphoric scholars (e.g., Benkler, 2006) from the more skeptic ones (e.g., Hilbert, 2009; Hindman, 2009). Some empirical analyses attest that Internet usage advances political knowledge, civic engagement and support for democratic values (Boulliane, 2009; Nisbet, Stoycheff & Pearce, 2012; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2009), while others report a negative or null effect of the Internet on political knowledge, awareness, and participation (Kaufhold, Valenzuela & De Zúñiga, 2010). A few studies focus more in depth on democratic support. Some of them attest that the use of the web for information-seeking purposes seems uncorrelated with trust in government (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). Avery (2009) does not find differences in trust in government between citizens exposed to online campaign news compared to others. McNeal et al. (2008) observe that online citizen-initiated contact with the government has improved the quality of interaction with it, though looking for online information on institutional websites has a positive, but not statistically significant, effect on political trust. Internet use seems even damaging. Norris (2011) finds that it is associated with lower democratic satisfaction, while Im et al. (2014) attest that citizens who spend more time on the web display a lower degree of trust in government, even though this negative effect is moderated by access to governmental websites. Conversely, other scholars provide evidence that in democratic political systems Internet users are more satisfied with democracy than nonusers (Bailard, 2012). Some scholars find a positive relationship between the use of e-government websites and trust in government (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Welch, Hinnant & Moon, 2005). Some of these studies do not discriminate between overall Internet usage or information retrieval and consumption of online news. Moreover, they examine the effect of the Internet as a whole, without providing a comparison to online media outlets (for an exception: Dimitrova et al., 2014). Some scholars

suggest that we live in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), nevertheless the rise of social media shown that the web is not a plain milieu, and we should distinguish the Web 1.0 (a mass medium) from the networked Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Accordingly, we investigate the effect of the consumption of news from Web 1.0 outlets (i.e., news websites owned by mass media and institutional websites linked to political elites) versus that from Web 2.0 social media (e.g., independent blogs and social network sites). Although the new media overcome the constraints of resources, time and space that restrict the diffusion of news offline, the diffusion of information via online news media follows the top-down approach typical of Web 1.0 websites, which rely on the one-way style of communication adopted by offline mass media (Deuze, 2003). Online news organizations seek freedom from readers and adopt 'utilitarian, defensive, and fundamentally conservative relationships to audiences' (Ananny, 2014). Journalists try to preserve their one-way publishing control and consider the audience as a recipient (Lewis, 2012), to the extent that the impact of public discourse held on SNS on the daily meetings held in newsrooms or on the editorial line is minimal (Hermida, 2013). Political information still flows from the top (the political elite) with little room for user-generated content or alternative viewpoints (Ananny, 2014; for a partially different view: Chadwick, 2013).1 The market of online information is dominated by a limited number of outlets belonging to the same media corporations that are active offline (Hindman, 2009). The information available on online news websites is still mediated and influenced by editors and political elites, who can slant news according to their interests to build support for the established institutions and the democratic regime. Even when journalists are more independent, they rely on information selected according to the credibility and authoritativeness of the source and this "favors those in positions of power and shapes how issues and events are subsequently represented in the media" (Hermida, Lewis, & Zamith, 2014, p. 492; see also: Bennett, 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). As a consequence, we would expect that the consumption of information from institutional and news media websites will foster political trust due to the overall prosystem bias of these sources. Hypothesis 1 (H1): Trust in political institutions should be higher among citizens that consume news from news websites than among those who do not. While traditional media have long dominated the process of creation and distribution of news, the rise of social media can break this dominance (e.g., Meraz & Papacharissi, 2012). In fact, the interactive layout of blogs and SNS such as Facebook or Twitter, promotes participation and peer-to-peer conversation, providing room for a new bottom-up style of communication. Social media become ambient information environments (Bruns & Burgess, 2012; Hermida, 2010, 2013) that facilitate the production of user-generated content (Hermida, 2010) and information sharing, though without the established hierarchy usually proposed by traditional media (Hermida, 2013). Social media provide egalitarian access to the production and the consumption of news that is no longer elite-biased (Hermida, Lewis & Zamith, 2014; Lewis, 2012; Woodly, 2008).2 For this reason, some scholars consider social media as a virtual 'agora' for democratic debate that can "foster decentralized citizen control as opposed to hierarchical elite control" (Meraz, 2009: 682; see also Benkler, 2006) and help citizens evaluate the performance of the political system (Bailard, 2012) without the lens of elite media outlets.The unmediated nature of social media and social networking sites can potentially alter individuals' exposure to information and favor direct access to news that circulates among peers without the moderation of news corporations

(Hermida, 2010).3 This lack of editorial filtering generates a more plural and polarized public sphere, in which alternative voices are no longer restrained by dominant media outlets, and promotes critical thought among Internet users (Benkler, 2006). Citizens are more likely to be exposed to marginalized voices (Lewis, 2012) and antisystem arguments that could decrease their confidence.4 Hypothesis 2 (H2): Trust in political institutions should be lower among citizens that consume news from social media than among those who do not.

Analysis of survey data

Variables

To test these hypotheses we employ data from the Eurobarometer survey held across 27 European Union countries in November 2012. This survey contains information on approximately 1,000 individuals per country. Respondents were asked whether they tend to trust or not each of the following political institutions: a) the national government; b) the regional and local government; c) the parliament; d) political parties. We combined these four items to generate an additive index of Political Trust, ranging from 0 to 4, which accounts for the number of institutions trusted by the respondent. This index is our dependent variable.5 On average, respondents declared trust in 1.3 (std. dev. 1.44) political institutions. Trust is higher in Nordic countries like Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, where citizens trust more than two institutions and 80% of respondents trust at least one. Conversely, in Southern European countries (e.g., Greece, Italy, and Spain) Political Trust is around 0.5 and less than 30% of respondents declared trust in at least one institution. The main independent variables are related to the consumption of online news. While users can access the web for a number of purposes, we know that "the potential political influence of the Internet hinges on its capacity to make communication, information retrieval, and information dispersion more efficient" (Bailard, 2012, p. 157; Ceron & Memoli, 2015b). As such, we test H1 and H2 by distinguishing whether Internet users consume news from news websites or social media. News from Websites is equal to 1 if the respondent consumes political news from institutional (e.g., governmental) or official websites of traditional media outlets, and equal to 0 otherwise. News from Social Media is equal to 1 if the respondent gathers political information from social media and social network sites (e.g., blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.), and equal to 0 otherwise.6 We control for a set of variables commonly used in the literature: the dummy variables Press News, Radio News, and TV News, each taking the value of 1 if the respondent gathers news from that source, which controls for the consumption of news offline; Political Discussions catches how often individuals discuss political matters with friends or relatives and ranges from 0 (never) to 4 (very often); Economic Evaluation expresses the respondent's evaluation of the state of the national economy (equal to 1 if positive and 0 if not); Economic Expectations measures the respondent's expectations on the outlook of the national economy (equal to 1 if positive, 0 if stationary and -1 if negative). We also add the following sociodemographic variables: Age of the respondent; Class, based on the respondent's self-placement within the working (value 0), the middle (1) or the upper class (2); Education (number of years spent in education); Urban (equal to 0 if the respondent lives in a rural area, equal to 1 if he lives in a small town and equal to 2 if he lives in a big city); Gender (0 for male and 1 for female). Finally, we include country-level indices based on World Bank data

(www.govindicators.org) to control for the socioeconomic and political background of each country in 2012, as well as information on the features of the media system, based on survey data (Popescu, Gosselin & Santana Pereira, 2010). These variables are: Political Stability (higher values imply higher likelihood of stability); the share of Internet Users; Unemployment rate; Media Quality, an index that measures the accuracy of the news and the pluralism of mass media.

Results

Table 1 displays the results of the analysis.8 In Model 1, we test our hypotheses through an ordered logistic regression with fixed effects by country to account for the fact that there are several observations (individuals) nested in different countries. As a robustness check, in Model 2 we perform a multilevel ordered logit that includes the country-level variables discussed above. The consumption of online news is linked with trust, even though this relationship differs according to the Internet source from which the user gathers information. In line with H1, the consumption of news from Websites (e.g., institutional websites and online traditional media outlets) is positively associated with Political Trust. This result is analogous to that of offline traditional media such as Press News and Radio News, which are linked with higher trust while, in line with previous studies, the consumption of TV News has no effects (Avery, 2009; Newton, 1999).9 Conversely, the consumption of News from Social Media is associated with lower propensity to express trust in political institutions. This result confirms H2 and, in line with our theoretical framework, suggests that the diffusion of political information on social media stems from a different process if compared to online and offline traditional media. The elite-driven, top-down approach adopted by traditional media and news websites supports the established democratic institutions, while the consumption of news from social media seems to jeopardize political trust and democratic support, paving the way to anti-system and anti-politics attitudes.10 With respect to the country-level variables, we observe that Political Trust is higher in countries with stronger Political Stability; the quality of the media system is positively associated with trust, while the share of Internet users, per se, does not seem to have any effect.11 Although studies based on cross-sectional survey data do not provide evidence on the direction of the causal mechanism linking online news consumption and democratic support (see below), our findings confirm that a relationship exists and highlight differences in the level of political trust between Internet users that consume news from online media outlets or from social media. To substantiate these findings, in the next section we perform a sentiment analysis of the Italian case, showing the differences between online media outlets and social media.

Content analysis of news websites and social media

The debate on the public funding of political parties We analyze the Italian case, focusing on the corruption scandals that erupted in the spring of 2012 and on the subsequent heated debate on the reform of public funding of parties that took place almost in the same period when the Eurobarometer survey was held. The issue of cutting public funding to reduce the costs of politics has been highly relevant in recent years and was one of the reasons behind the striking electoral success of the Five Star Movement. This debate became particularly salient in 2012: Almost all the main Italian parties were hit, between March and June, by corruption scandals,

prompting a policy change that was eventually enacted between April and July, when the parliament reformed the law on public funding of parties. Taking the cue from this, we gathered information on the news broadcast online at seven points in time, from the beginning of April, when the debate started, to the beginning of July, when the law was passed. We selected the news written in Italian and downloaded texts through the following set of "keywords" related to the debate on public funding: finanziamento partiti, finanziamento pubblico, antipolitica, casta, soldi partiti, soldi politica, soldi pubblici, rimborsi elettorali, rimborsi partiti. These keywords include all the main relevant words used in the debate that were dealing with the concept of politics and "money," "electoral refunds," "funding," as well as words like "antipolitics" and political "caste" that send back to that debate. We gathered articles published on the online websites of media companies and compared them with posts published on social media like Twitter, a social network for microblogging

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Method

To analyze the content of such a large amount of data, we employed a technique of supervised sentiment analysis (SSA) recently proposed by Hopkins & King (2010). If compared to other methods, this technique presents some advantages that allow us to produce more accurate estimates (Ceron, Curini & Iacus, 2013). Traditional sentiment analysis techniques rely on automated and predefined ontological dictionaries that sometimes fail to classify ironic or paradoxical sentences, and do not catch all the nuances of language (e.g., specific jargons or neologisms) or their evolution over time (Lewis, Zamith & Hermida, 2013). Conversely, the SSA technique adopts a semiautomated and supervised two-stage process that fruitfully combines the quality of an in-depth content analysis with the quantity of information available in the Big Data world (Ceron et al., 2014). In the first step, human coders, who are more effective than ontological dictionaries in recognizing the nuances of the language, read and code a subsample of the texts collected and create the training set. In the second step, an algorithm employs the information provided by manual coding and performs an automated statistical analysis that produces accurate estimates of the aggregate distribution of the opinions in the whole population of texts that have been collected.

Results

In our case, the SSA method can help to assess whether a post or a piece of news retains an anti-political content. In detail, we consider as antipolitics any comment reporting information that discredits politics or throws mud on political parties and politicians, as well as any text that comments on the news by expressing negativity toward the political class. By doing so, we measured, at different points in time, the aggregate percentage of antipolitics news broadcast on new media and compared it with the percentage of antipolitics information available on social media. The analysis has been done by two trained coders. Intercoder reliability is 0.88. Compared to hand-coded documents in the training set, the root mean square error of the estimates is 1.5%, therefore the supervised analysis was particularly accurate.12 The results are

shown in Figure 1. Despite repeated political scandals or attempt to reform, the observed antipolitical sentiment is relatively constant between April and July. We only observe a limited variation both within social media (black line), where the share of negativity ranges from 69.6% to 75%,13 and within news media websites (gray line), which report an amount of negative news between 35.8% and 43%.We notice a sharp difference in the extent of antipolitical information available from each source.14 As a consequence, the consumption of news from social media strongly enhances the likelihood that users bump into antipolitical, antisystem information, with potential negative effects on their trust in political institutions. Conversely, the level of negativity is markedly lower within online news diffused by traditional media outlets. As such, consumers of traditional media will be exposed both to antisystem and prosystem stimuli, with a slight prevalence of the latter. In fact, even in a period studded by political scandals, traditional media keep broadcasting the viewpoints of the political elite, and their effort to rebut negativity generates higher democratic support and political trust. Although this example does not provide evidence on the direction of the causal mechanism, it substantiate the results of the cross-sectional analysis because it highlights and confirms that the content of information available on social media is indeed different from that broadcast by online news media, as suggested in our theoretical framework. In turn, such a difference could possibly affect citizens' attitude toward political institutions, though only among those who retrieve information from online sources.15

Conclusion

Scholars found controversial effects of Internet usage on democratic support. The present paper addresses this puzzle by evaluating the relationship between the consumption of online news and trust

in political institutions. We hypothesize that the elite-driven, top-down approach of communication adopted by Web 1.0 news media will slant news in order to support the established democratic political system (with limited room for alternative viewpoints), while the unmediated and bottom-up nature of Web 2.0 social media will host and favor the circulation of alternative information that negatively affects political trust. A statistical analysis on cross-sectional Eurobarometer data related to 27 European countries and an in-depth study of the content of online political information performed by means of supervised sentiment analysis of the Italian case shed light on the differences between news media and social media. The results confirm that consumption of news from online media websites is positively associated with higher political trust, while the access to information available on social media is linked with a lower propensity to express trust in political institutions. We must recall that neither the cross-sectional analysis of survey data nor the sentiment analysis of the Italian case provide evidence on the direction of the causal mechanism linking online news consumption and democratic support. The causal mechanism could also work in the opposite direction, and distrustful citizens may switch from traditional media outlets to social media and SNS. However, for theoretical reasons, we contend that the consumption of news affects the evaluation of democratic institutions: As long as Internet facilitates accidental exposure to political information through hyperlinks and hashtags (Chadwick, 2009; Norris, 2000; Tewksbury & Rittenburg, 2012), we suggest that the consumption of online news is the independent variable affecting political trust

and that the different contents of such information is crucial to assess the effect of accidental exposure on democratic support. Nevertheless, before making any causal claim, these findings need to be confirmed by further analyses able to assess the direction of the causal mechanism (for a related example concerning a randomized field experiment: Bailard, 2012). Far from any normative intent, the present study does not aim to evaluate whether news media and social media are, per se, 'good' or 'bad' based on whether they foster antipolitics or political trust. What we observe is a citizen-elite divide in the content of news broadcast online by traditional media outlets compared to the news spread on social media, and such difference seems related to the higher or lower level of trust expressed by news consumers. The higher negativity of political news reported by social media need not be a 'negative' outcome for the political system when we are dealing with dysfunctional and corrupt institutions or non democratic countries. In these contexts the consumption of news from social media can exert mirror-holding and window-opening effects (Bailard, 2012; Stoycheff & Nisbet, 2014), which decrease trust in unworthy institutions, prompt demands for democracy, encourage mobilization and urge reforms (Nisbet, Stoycheff & Pearce, 2012; Norris, 2011). Our analysis, however, focuses on European countries. Therefore, the results are generalizable only to that extent and wield implications accordingly. Compared to others, European countries tend to display higher levels of democracy and media freedom. Here the negative relation between social media and trust can be damaging for the democratic political system. Even if some countries display political instability (e.g., Belgium, Italy) or have been recently hit by corruption scandals involving national and local governments (e.g., Italy, Germany, Spain), the strong level of negativity of the news broadcast in social media can generate skepticism and antipolitics sentiments (De Wilde, Michailidou & Trenz, 2014). Traditional media outlets give coverage to political scandals, raising an alarm for the sake of restoring stability (e.g., Donohue, Tichenor & Olien, 1995). Therefore, beside criticism, they also broadcast the attempts made by democratic political systems to reform themselves. Conversely, in the social media environment, such positive voices seem more hidden. Users become much more demanding of political institutions and this perpetuates distrust without generating a virtuous circle. This is even more relevant because the virtuous circle theory argues that news yields positive effects on trust among news consumers that already have prior political interest and knowledge (Norris, 2000, 2011). Conversely, in the social media world, there can be accidental exposure to political information (e.g., Chadwick, 2009) whereby users with limited political knowledge can consume biased antipolitical news.16 In light of this, our results point out that the quality of news is crucial. On the one hand, the media system should still rely on professional journalism rather than citizen journalism. On the other, political institutions and traditional media organizations should become more transparent and should increase their efforts to broadcast high-quality news on SNS in order to further the pluralism of voices (accidentally) heard therein.17 Notwithstanding these results, we should be cautious in drawing conclusions to avoid the risk of incurring technological determinism and considering the Internet as a fixed object. As long as the social media age is still in its infancy, we cannot foresee whether these trends are steady or, conversely, whether the Web 2.0 will undergo a process of 'normalization' (Lasorsa, Lewis & Holton, 2012) analogous to that of Web 1.0. Accordingly, future research could investigate whether the differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 will fade away and whether the effect of news spread on SNS interacts with individual traits or systemic features. So

far, however, this gap between mediated and unmediated sources of information has implications for the debate on social media as a public sphere for deliberative democracy (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Loader & Mercea, 2011) and warns against the potential drawbacks of e-democracy (Ceron & Memoli, 2015b). In fact, the lack of editorial filtering allows social media to harbor alternative information and non-mainstream viewpoints. In principle, this could enhance pluralism and accountability. However, if social media become a terrain for the diffusion of unmediated news biased in favor of antisystem arguments, this can damage democratic support and thwart any process of e-democracy and online deliberation.

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