
Are People ore Free To Express Their Opinions On Controversial Topics On Twitter Versus Facebook?

The pervasive use of social media has created new opportunities for online political discussion. Some scholars have expressed hope that this may support democratic practices by expanding the number of people who participate and talk about politics. Specifically, people who have been silent offline might feel more comfortable speaking out online. Much research on social media has focused in general on how users express their political opinions online and how social media use broadly is related to political participation. Thus, social media may play an important role in shaping political communication.

Social media websites are conducive to political discussions because they have affordances, such as allowing users to post and share information and connect to a large network, that make them attractive for political discussions. In this way, users can easily spread their messages, interact with like-minded others, and access content created by those in their networks. Thus, a considerable amount of research has focused on the relationship between social media and political engagement, and scholars have mostly focused on frequency of social media use, purpose and motivation of social media use, and network characteristics of social media websites to understand political engagement. These studies concluded that social media use for information increases political knowledge, political participation, and engagement. However, few studies have examined whether the content of political discussions online vary on different social media platforms.

This dissertation aimed to fill this gap by comparing political discussion across two popular social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, to understand whether people's willingness to express opinions on controversial issues differs on these two platforms. Specifically, this dissertation examined whether the affordances of Twitter versus Facebook would influence people's willingness to speak out on each platform. Affordances are attributes of a platform that determine how people can use it and include the interactions between the object and the users, and the features of the object.

My main argument is that these affordances will lead people to differ in the extent of their expression of controversial opinions on Twitter versus on Facebook. This is an important area of inquiry because almost 69% of Americans who use at least one social media platform have engaged in political discussions on it. Facebook and Twitter were chosen for this study because they are among the largest and most predominant social media sites in the United States of America. Twitter, for example, has 76 million users in the U.S., and Facebook has 160 million active users in the U.S.