Selective Avoidance and ‘Safe Space’: Political Implications of Unfriending and Unfollowing on Social Media

選擇性迴避和“安全空間”：社交媒体删除好友和取消关注的政治影响

Submitted to
Department of Media and Communication
媒體與傳播系
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
哲學博士學位

by

ZHU Qinfeng
朱勤鳳

July 2019
二零一九年七月
ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the global proliferation of social media platforms has promoted what seems to be a more open, decentralized, and demotic form of communication, which has motivated scholars and pundits alike to envision what kind of changes it could bring to our existing social and political systems. A rich body of literature has focused on the “connective” affordances enabling people to connect with those from different backgrounds, collapsing the old boundaries of geography, demography and time, and expanding access to a wide spectrum of viewpoints and ideas (e.g., Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Goel, Mason, & Watts, 2010). Thanks to the increased connectivity, scholars have highlighted the pivotal roles of social media in rekindling notions like network society and networked public (Boyd, 2008; Castells, 2012). Empirical studies have also demonstrated its potential in contributing to a more politically informed and engaged citizenry (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016; Skoric, Zhu, & Pang, 2016). This has made some scholars in political communication to foresee a utopian future where social media could fulfill Barber’s (1984) promise of strong democracy.

Still, the extant research has predominantly focused on the functioning of social media through the lens of connectivity, which does not necessarily resemble people’s lived experiences. As online social networks expand drastically, people tend to suffer cognitive and social fatigue from over connection (Dunbar, 2016). Particularly in times of political conflicts when political ideologies and group identities become salient, the norm of social connectivity is likely to weaken. Catering to these human tendencies, social media platforms incorporate an enlarging repertoire of affordances that allow a greater capacity of filtering and disconnection in everyday online interactions. On platforms like Facebook and Twitter, individual users could easily disconnect from others through “unfriending” and “unfollowing” after a tie has been established (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). These
disconnective affordances allow users to redefine the boundaries of their online social networks, restrict information flow, and shield themselves from undesirable content and people. How would these changes in the structure and nature of online communication shape individuals’ worldviews and engagement in the public arena? What are the democratic implications?

This thesis aims to answer these questions by closely examining social media behaviors that lead to tie dissolution and suspension, namely unfriending and unfollowing, in the context of political conflicts. They are mechanisms of manual re-configuration of one’s ego-networks. On the one hand, unfriending someone eliminates that person’s posts and any other activities from our social media newsfeeds. Since information on social media is largely curated by our social contacts, unfriending enables us to regain control over our online information exposure and reshape it to our own liking. At the same time, cutting digital ties with someone also denies that person’s access to our online social networks and eliminates chances for future interaction, hence constituting a form of selective disengagement. By conceptualizing unfriending and unfollowing behaviors under the term of selective avoidance and with the metaphor of ‘safe space’, this thesis seeks answers to the following overarching research questions. 1) Do disconnective behaviors like unfriending and unfollowing constitute a form of selective avoidance, and what are the boundary conditions? 2) Given that unfriending and unfollowing could help build online safe spaces where people are sheltered away from opposition and challenges, are they conducive of an increased level of political expression and participation?

This thesis consists of four empirical studies conducted in the context of Hong Kong politics. A survey (Study 1) and an experiment (Study 2) were carried out in order to address the first set of research questions regarding selective avoidance. Based on the survey data from the 2017 Chief Executive election, Study 1 shows that cross-cutting views encountered
during political discussion with distant others predict an increased likelihood of unfriending and unfollowing, particularly among opinion minorities. It was followed up with an online experiment conducted in the context of the legislator disqualification controversy. Consistent with the survey findings, Study 2 confirms that participants are systematically more likely to unfollow those holding oppositional views than those sharing the same political stance. Furthermore, guided by the heuristic-systematic model of information processing, it shows that defense goals amplify such selective bias whereas accuracy and social goals tend to attenuate it. While previous studies find that in day-to-day life social media can expose people to different views thanks to the expansion of weak ties (Barnidge, 2016; Y. Kim, 2011; Yang, Barnidge, & Rojas, 2017), this research suggests that in political conflicts when people tend to be defensive of their own beliefs, the same diversity exposure can lead to the breakdown of online social connections, arguably because of the weakness of weak ties.

In order to answer the second set of research questions, I conducted two survey studies examining how politically motivated unfriending may influence political engagement via social media, and if the effect could extend to offline concrete political actions. Based on a two-wave panel survey, Study 3 identifies that the extent of using social media for politics does not contribute to the occurrence of unfriending behavior over time. Rather, it is the act of tie dissolution at a prior time that leads to an increased incentive for political engagement. However, this mobilizing effect does not apply to both political expression and information intake, the two key ingredients for a healthy democracy. While unfriending could encourage expression, it does little to help citizens consume political information. Further, only among opinion minorities is unfriending associated with an increased political expression on social media over time, thus supporting the “safe space” thesis. Study 4 extends the line of research by investigating whether the online safe space effect of unfriending could translate to offline political actions. Using survey data collected at the height of the 2014 Umbrella Movement,
this study confirms that politically motivated unfriending is associated with an increased level of political expression on social media, which in turn predicts the intensity of actual participation in the street protests. Further, social identity plays a significant role in this process, as the mediation model is only statistically significant among the respondents who identify themselves as Hongkongers and perceive greater out-group threat.

Discussion of the findings focuses on the following three questions. First of all, this thesis presents an overall model that challenges some of the assumptions of Diana Mutz’s work. How can we reconcile the discrepancies? Based on the findings, what conditions can qualify the phenomenon of digital tie dissolution as selective avoidance? Finally, how should we view the nature of the political activism that is promoted by social media’s disconnective function?