Cultural Difference, Social Values, or Political Systems? Predicting Willingness to Engage in Online Political Discussion in 54 Societies

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The oft-quoted John Dewey line "[d]emocracy begins in conversation" (Lamont, 1959, p. 58) highlights the political implication of free and vibrant discussions in modern societies.
What influences individuals’ willingness to express online?

Demographics? Pol interests? Efficacy? Grievances?

The QUESTION
1. The study started with a casual conversation outside CMC.

2. Data collection of discussion forums.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>日期</th>
<th>项目</th>
<th>内容</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021-01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>任务完成情况及建议</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021-02</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>项目进展情况</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021-03</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>问题与解决方案</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021-04</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>预期目标与实际进度对比</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021-05</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>下一步工作计划</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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注：以上内容为示例，具体项目内容请根据实际情况填写。
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The Data
Not everyone participate, even after they read a post they are interested in.
1. Contrary to the notion that the internet could bring empowerment to the public by offering a virtual community for active expression, communication, and interaction, most users don’t participate very much.

2. Instead, “lurkers” – people who consume information online but rarely or never contribute – are the majority in most online communities (Jones & Rafaeli, 1999; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Nonnecke, et al., 2004).
The infamous “Great Firewall of China” along with the massive deployment of cyber police forces (Sohmen, 2001) has seriously limited the content of online political opinions.

Censorship, implementation of real-name registration, and violation of users’ rights create a chilling effect on the public, deterring people from actively participating in political discussions online.
Lu Xun: “看客”

《药》：“（一堆人的）颈项都伸得很长，仿佛许多鸭，被无形的手捏住了的，向上提着。”

《示众》：“剎時間，也就圍滿了大半圈的看客。待到增加了禿頭的老頭子之後，空缺已經不多，而立刻又被一個赤膊的紅鼻子胖大漢補滿了。這胖子過于橫闊，占了兩人的地位，所以續到的便只能屈在第二層，從前面的兩個脖子之間伸進腦袋去。

《藤野先生》：“但偏有中国人夹在里边：给俄国人做侦探，被日本军捕获，要枪毙了，围着看的也是一群中国人；在讲堂里的还有一个我。”
“围观（surrounding gaze），如果不是继承了国人偷窥的传统，也是继承了国人看戏听书的传统。在这种围观的剧场里，启蒙被表演得变得孤立、滑稽，他越是慷慨激昂，就愈发显得渺小，具有喜剧色彩。围观者嗑着瓜子，反而有一种免费午餐的优越感。

围观者以为围观就可以围出天堂绿洲伊甸园，他们围了几千年，结果围出了个寸草不生河蟹横行的马勒戈壁。“

-- comments from online
1. A two-way comparison between the U.S. and China.

2. A three-way comparison between the U.S., Taiwan, and China.

3. A 3 (country) by 2 (topic of discussion: political, movie) study.

4. go global

From two-way comparison to a global study

2. Second, a minimum level of trust is needed for forum users to contribute content. Ridings, Gefen and Arinze (2006)


What drives participation?
1. Nonnecke and Preece (2000) showed that variations of topic, community size, and forum traffic level could influence the amount of participants in online communities.

2. Price, Nir, and Cappella (2006) found that climate of group opinion influences people’s willingness to express during online discussion.

Inquiry of contextual factors
Despite the diversity of the predictors that have been explored, the findings are somewhat limited in scope and predominantly micro-individualistic. The unit of analysis was exclusively individuals, with a few exceptions (see Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). The frameworks invoked are largely social psychological (e.g., motivation, trust, fear of isolation) and behavioral (e.g., news media use, internet use frequency).

What is the story to be told?
Part of the overly focus on psychological attributes that contribute to online discussion stems from an underlying idealized assumption that human behavior in cyberspace defies regularities governed by social structural factors.

It is true that the internet may reduce or even overcome the temporal and geographic constraints and provides discussion spaces based on identical technologies for users across the globe, nevertheless, seeing the ways people behave in virtual communities as insulated from their cultural, social, and political configurations is untenable.
Nisbet and colleagues (2012) find that the relationship between internet use and citizen’s demand for democracy is contingent upon technological and political contexts.

Robinson (2005) looked across multiple countries and found online message boards hosted on prominent newspapers in the US, Brazil, and France exhibited significant cultural variation in terms of how users expressed themselves.

Overall, it seems at least three sources of influence are at work: a) cultural traditions that permeate people’s everyday life, b) the way people think and the values they cherish, and c) the type of political institution that characterizes a given society.
The argument that culture shapes individual behavior is not new. For instance, Weber (1958) sees economic behavior as a function of religious culture. Among Hofstede’s six cultural indicators, two stand out to be potentially impactful on expressive behaviors: individualism and masculinity.
Almond and Verba (1963) argued that a democracy requires a vibrant participating culture that goes with it.

Nations high on self-expression value scales include most English speaking countries (e.g., the US, Canada, Australia and Britain) and Protestant European states (e.g., Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden); in contrast, Confucian, Orthodox, and Islamic states are most low on self-expression scale (Inglehart & Welzel, 2010).
The main mechanism lies in the measures of internet control that each country takes. Internet censorship is widely practiced for religious, political, and other concerns across the world.

Facing a hostile internet environment, lurkers play a much lower stakes game than those who actively speak out in forums. In authoritarian countries with progressive internet control, people who post dissent information could even be tracked down by the authority, and the stakes of speaking out is much higher. When a hostile opinion climate emerges, adopting a simple loafing strategy is usually the case (Yun & Park, 2011).
The data for this study contains two parts: discussion forum data and country-level predictor data.

1. A list of 262 countries was obtained from Internet World Stats.

2. A series of Google search was conducted through using combined generic search terms such as “forums/bulletin boards,” “politics,” and “country name.”

3. A total of 54 countries or territories and their corresponding forums were identified. The list covers a diverse range of countries speaking 18 languages from Asia (20), North America (3), South America (5), Europe (15), Africa (8), and Oceania (3).
4. All threads in the “politics” sections of the selected forums were downloaded for analysis.

5. URL of the thread, title of the thread, time and dates of the thread, content of the thread, number of views (i.e., the number of internet users who clicked on the thread to read its content), number of replies the thread received (i.e., the number of internet users who offered their comments), and authors’ screen names.

6. A total of 1,218,698 threads were captured.
Reply/view ratio. We took the ratio of the number of views and the number of replies a thread received to quantify the percentage of internet surfers who expressed their viewpoints after reading a thread. Conceptually, it speaks to the level of willingness to engage in political discussions and dialogues, or the amount of lurking behavior in a forum.

The grand mean for this variable is 0.023 (SD=0.012). On average, 2 percent of the clicks on a thread will result in a reply. The lowest country-level mean is 0.001 (Egypt) and the highest is 0.086 (Spain).
National culture dimension. We included four Hofstede’s cultural dimensions into our study: power distance (PDI), individualism versus collectivism (IDV), masculinity versus femininity (MAS), and uncertainty avoidance (UAI). Data on these four dimensions were harvested from Hofstede’s official website (http://geert-hofstede.com/index.php).
Value orientation. Unlike Hofstede’s cultural indicators, the two value orientation indicators help distinguish traditional societies from modernized secular societies. The data for the two value orientation dimensions were obtained from the World Value Survey (WVS) website (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

Traditional vs. Secular-rational values and Survival vs. Self-expression values

Measures
Political system. There are quite a few publicly available scoring systems aiming to characterize the political systems of countries across the globe (e.g., Freedom House’s Freedom in the World Index; the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, etc.). For this study, we chose Marshall and Jaggers’ Polity IV scheme. The sample for this study included consolidated democracy such as Germany, incoherent authority regimes such as Singapore, and autocracies such as Saudi Arabia.
Control variables. Three control variables were included: GDP per capita, internet penetration, and the total number of threads from the selected forums.
We used both OLS regression and multilevel regression to test the hypotheses. The dependent variable for OLS regression analysis is the mean of all threads’ reply/view ratios within a country’s selected forum; the dependent variable for multilevel regression analysis is the reply/view ratio of a particular thread.
Do culture matter?
The graph shows the proportion of public expression in political discussion forums plotted against individualism. The equation for the line of best fit is $y = 0.0002x + 0.0141$ with $R^2 = 0.0965$. The countries are represented as dots, with Malaysia and Argentina having the highest proportion of public expression, and countries like China, Vietnam, and Egypt having the lowest.
Do political system matter?
Prop = 0.0017*Democracy + 0.0169
R² = 0.2398
Our findings suggest that willingness to engage in political conversation in online forums is not only influenced by micro-individualistic factors such as trust, efficacy, and motivations to express one’s viewpoints, as was suggested by previous literatures, but also determined by macro-societal variables.
The liberalization and empowerment brought by the internet that idealists foresee are not universal. Although new communication technologies allow easier access to information and provide better platforms for conversation, a vibrant civic culture and a supporting political institution are needed for catalyzing the influence of the internet.

Our study contributes a new piece of evidence to this body of literature by linking people's online discussion behavior to macro structural variables.

Implication