We the People:

The role of social media in the participatory community of the Tea Party movement

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ABSTRACT

From intensive activism to the simple act of voting, political participation has declined in developed democracies, particularly in the United States, for decades. The Internet opens new possibilities – and presents new challenges – for collective political action. On the one hand, new technologies have lowered barriers to participation and fostered political ties beyond the traditional barriers of time and place. On the other hand, the Internet has allowed citizens a greater degree of choice over their information consumption and social ties, potentially leading to "cyber-Balkanization," or the creation of separate, mutually hostile online social spaces within a society.

This dissertation explores the role of the Internet and social media in sparking and sustaining the Tea Party movement in the United States. In particular, it examines how online social relationships affected political discourse and activism within the movement, encouraging previously apathetic citizens to participate politically. The study shows that the Internet and social media were necessary, although not sufficient, factors in drawing new participants into the Tea Party movement. Involvement in the movement seems to have increased members' enthusiasm for seeking out and debating political information, at least partially protecting them from the effects of cyber-Balkanization. Further, the online social ties created in the course of the movement do not seem to have produced irrational hostility towards ideological opponents. On the other hand, the cohesive online culture of the Tea Party may have reinforced some members' xenophobic attitudes as to what it means to be a "true" American.

In sum, despite some evidence of ethnic or cultural exclusivity, Tea Party members' engagement with social media seems to have promoted political participation, engagement with a diverse range of ideas, and a basic sense of common purpose even with ideological opponents.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholars have struggled to explain and overcome the decline in democratic engagement in American politics. By the end of the 20th century an ever-shrinking portion of the citizenry could be relied upon to vote in elections, let alone sign a petition, volunteer with a political campaign, or run for office (Putnam 2000). To some cyber-optimists, the advent of the Internet - and especially the social media phenomenon of Web 2.0 - has offered a potential panacea for this crisis of democratic legitimacy: by facilitating independent information-seeking and self-expression, and by lowering the barriers to political participation, the Internet seems to overcome the limitations of the earlier mass media system, empowering citizens to involve themselves in democratic discourse and action. For cyber-pessimists, on the other hand, the Internet threatens more sinister possibilities for civic engagement. In particular, some have worried about the propensity of Internet users to seek out information and social connections that confirm their preconceptions and fail to challenge their assumptions.

In the spring of 2009, thousands of Americans became involved in the Tea Party movement, a populist libertarian expression of frustration with the status quo. This group relied on the Internet to bring in new members, discuss the issues of the day, and build political community. The movement has also been accused of fostering racist, ideologically extremist attitudes. This dichotomy between democratization and communal exclusivity provides an excellent opportunity to examine how modern online social spaces mediate political engagement. However, not all observers have acknowledged the role of social media in the formation of the Tea Party, or even the existence of mass participation in the movement; before analyzing the movement, its selection as a case study must be justified and its history briefly outlined[1].

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[1] A note on sources: much writing on the Tea Party, both in the popular and academic press, has been overly partisan. Dimaggio (2011) has analyzed the Tea Party through the lens of Chomsky's propaganda model, suggesting that the movement's libertarian ideology is the result of decades of neo-liberal brainwashing on the part of Fox News, conservative talk radio, and conservative think tanks. While Dimaggio's obvious partisan disdain for the libertarian ideology makes it difficult to take his work seriously, he does provide interesting statistical correlations between Tea Party membership and reliance on conservative news sources. On the other hand, some accounts of the Tea Party have presented an overly rosy interpretation of the movement. Rasmussen's admittedly biased assessment takes the Tea Party at face value, ignoring any suggestion of corporate or elite influence (Rasmussen 2010). Both Formisano's historical take on the movement and Zernike's journalistic text eschew theory or partisanship in favor of a thorough account of the movement's first three years (Formisano 2012, Zernike 2010). Before beginning my own research, I attempted to weave together an unbiased view of the movement from a combination of these admittedly flawed works, as well as articles in the mainstream press; I hope, of course, that my own research can contribute to this picture.

From its earliest days, some critics have framed the Tea Party as, in former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's words, an "astroturf" rather than a grassroots movement (Powers 2009). According to this interpretation, wealthy elites underwrote the Tea Party, brainwashing or directly paying off its adherents to protest against big government and cause trouble at Democratic politicians' town hall meetings, all the while greatly exaggerating the number of participants in the movement. But while the Tea Party is certainly influenced by longstanding Republican and corporate interests, it cannot be dismissed as the brainchild of conservative elites. Support for the movement peaked at 32% of the American public in November of 2010, around the time of the midterm election that swept 87 new Republicans into Congress. In September of 2010, 3% of Americans reported active involvement in the movement (Gallup 2012). Given that in 2008, only 4% of Americans worked on a political campaign and only 9% attended a political meeting, Tea Party activists represented a huge proportion of the American citizens who took an active role in political affairs in 2010 (American National Election Studies 2010).

The Tea Party movement is best understood as a three-layered entity comprised of established Republican and corporate operatives, young libertarian partisans, and (by far the largest group) older political neophytes with a diverse range of conservative ideological preferences and a deep sense of frustration with the political status quo. Throughout the movement's history, these groups came together in tense union with the help of both broadcast and social media. While the Tea Party relied on a populist base, the groundwork was laid well in advance by establishment conservatives and libertarians. Both Ron Paul, de facto leader of the modern libertarian movement, and FreedomWorks, a conservative non-profit founded by billionaire David Koch and former House Majority Leader Dick Armey, had promoted the idea of anti-tax tea parties for years before the term first erupted onto the national scene in the spring of 2009 (Formisano 2012, 26; Rasmussen 2010, 116). While this activity almost certainly laid the foundation for the Tea Party movement, something clearly changed in 2008/2009 to alter the dynamic and bring in a truly populist dimension.

One event is routinely cited as the beginning of the national Tea Party movement: on February 19, CNBC financial correspondent Rick Santelli broke into a dramatic and apparently spontaneous rant on the floor of the Chicago stock exchange against President Obama's plan to refinance homeowners' mortgages, calling for a "Chicago tea party" in protest. The importance of this moment was dependent on both broadcast media and online social networks: a video of Santelli's outburst was repeatedly broadcast on Fox News, and a YouTube version went viral on conservative blogs and social media (Formisano 2012, 23-27).

From this point forward, the Tea Party rapidly expanded into a mass movement, fueled both by young libertarian organizers and by the conservative media. In April of 2009, Tax Day protests were held in 750 towns around the country; the largest, in Atlanta, had thousands of attendees. These events were explicitly promoted on Fox News, particularly by talk show host Glenn Beck (Formisano 2012, 27-28). However, the individual organizers of the events tended to be, not stereotypical Fox News Republicans, but young, tech-savvy libertarian partisans (Rasmussen 2010, 150). In the summer of 2009, Tea Party enthusiasts protested the Democrats' health care reform agenda at numerous town hall meetings across the country; again, while many of the protesters involved were new to politics, a leaked FreedomWorks memo provided help, advising activists to "artificially inflate your numbers" and "be disruptive" (Fang 2009). In September, again promoted by Beck, a crowd of nearly seventy-five thousand marched on Washington to protest, among other things, big government, socialism, and abortion (Formisano 2012, 30). The following year, the movement had a notable impact on the 2010 midterm elections, helping to usher in one of the largest partisan swings in decades; of the 87 new Republican members of Congress, 34 had never before held political office (Formisano 2012, 41).

As can be seen from the discussion above, the Tea Party movement is something of a paradox: a populist outpouring nurtured by elite special interests; a digitally savvy social media experiment bolstered by mainstream TV broadcasting. What cannot be denied, though, is that the movement brought 3% of Americans to political meetings, discussion forums, and canvassing shifts, many for the first time in their lives. An examination of the media and political landscapes and identities of Tea Party activists can help tease out the role of social media in building active democratic citizenship.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Participatory Democracy

As many political theorists have stressed, active participation in the political process is a crucial, normative requirement of a democratic society. J. S. Mill argued that participation fosters a sense of common purpose among citizens, allowing them to see their neighbors as members of the same political community rather than as competitors for scarce resources. Without a sense of membership in his community, he wrote, a citizen "never thinks of any collective interest, of any objects to be pursued jointly with others but only in competition with them, and in some measure at their expense" (Mill, quoted in Putnam 2000, 337). More recently, theorists of participatory democracy have considered mass participation beyond voting to be central to democratic legitimacy. Reacting against pluralist and competitive elitist theories of democracy, which emphasized elite dominance with minimal active input from the masses, advocates of participatory democracy have argued that participation "fosters human development, enhances a sense of political efficacy, reduces estrangement from power centers, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more acute interest in government affairs" (Held, 1996: 267-278; quoted in Scammell 2000, xxxiv). Despite these calls for increased participation, the late 20th and early 21st century have seen a decline in active involvement in politics in developed democracies, particularly the United States (Putnam 2000).

Participatory democrats have put forward a number of ideas for how to foster mass participation. Two of these concepts will be particularly relevant for this discussion of social media and the Tea Party: engagement in rational, deliberative discourse on the political issues of the day, and involvement in small, local chapters of political groups (Scammell 2000, xxxv-xxxvi). These two activities work in tandem to support participatory democrats' goal of a better-informed and more active citizenry. By engaging in rational discussion with their peers, citizens educate themselves and others and, in an ideal world, arrive at a consensus representing the common good. By involving themselves in small groups, citizens both create the platform for such discussions, and learn to see themselves as influential members of a larger community. However, as we shall see, these two concepts are sometimes at odds: strong affiliation with small groups can promote sectarian conflict within a society and undermine both rational discourse and conceptions of the nation as a whole. This tension raises important questions for the role of social media in promoting a politically

active citizenry. As an inherently social and discursive space, social media may both enable political participation and exacerbate sectarian rifts within society.

The Public Sphere and Social Capital

Rational discourse between citizens is crucial to participatory democracy; without the substantive understanding of the issues at hand that comes of such discussion, mass participation is shallow and even potentially harmful to good public policy. The cornerstone of discursive democratic theory is Jürgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere (Scammell 2000, xxxvi-xxxviii). Habermas defined the idealized public sphere as a social space in which all participants spoke as equals, made rational arguments, felt free to question authority and traditional political assumptions, and had access to the same information (Calhoun 1992, 12-13). Without rational discourse, Habermas argued, the political will of the masses could not be taken as a legitimate basis for the formation of government. A discursive citizenry, though, would necessarily take an active role in government, not merely voting in elections but cultivating its own representatives and keeping them in line with public opinion. An ideal public sphere, according to Habermas, existed in 18th century bourgeois society, when enlightened, educated private individuals came together to discuss and, ultimately, take control of public affairs (Calhoun 1992; Habermas 1984).

Small, locally based civic groups, which serve as platforms for rational discourse and incubators of political skills, are another essential aspect of participatory democracy. Thomas Jefferson, often cited as the American godfather of participatory democratic theory, was a strong proponent of citizen involvement in small-scale political groups: in a letter promoting greater local civic participation, Jefferson wrote that "making every citizen an active member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country, and its republican constitution" (Jefferson, quoted in Putnam 2000, 336). Modern advocates of participation tend to agree. Macpherson, for example, argues that citizens must be active in local chapters of their political parties in order to truly democratize the party system. To Pateman, small-scale political groups are key to fostering a sense of competency in citizens: only by believing that one can have an impact in a small-scale setting can the citizen develop a sense of her own importance in the grand political scheme. Participation in small groups, Pateman argues, also would help citizens better judge how their elected representatives were handling affairs of state (Scammell 2000, xxxv-xxxvi). Habermas himself linked the success of the public sphere to the kinds of face-to-face interactions found in small groups. In locating idealized discourse in bourgeois 18th century social circles, Habermas emphasized the importance of coffee

houses, salons, and a shared literary culture of newspapers and journals in fostering the social platforms necessary for rational discourse (Calhoun 1992, 16).

Indeed, sociologists studying the idea of "social capital" have found empirical evidence that involvement in civic groups increases citizens' general propensity to participate in politics and decreases corruption and other threats to democracy. Bourdieu originally defined social capital as "investment in social relations with expected returns" (Lin 1999, 30). In other words, social capital represents the potential of a person or group's social relationships to yield useful information, social status, or capacity for collective action. In a landmark macro-level empirical investigation of social capital and participation, Putnam defined social capital more concretely as "social relations that sustain and promote voluntary associations and groups" (Lin 1999, 45). Putnam showed that high levels of social capital in a society are correlated with both greater participation and policy outcomes more consistent with democratic ideals. In one telling example, Putnam linked differences in quality of regional governance in Italy with regional variations in social capital. Regions with high membership in voluntary organizations also tended to boast high voter turnout and newspaper readership; the regional governments of these same regions tended to be efficient and proactive. In regions with fewer markers of social capital, regional governments were more likely to be corrupt and inefficient (Putnam 2000, 344-346).

While civic groups may be a crucial platform for discussion and action, they have the problematic potential to promote extremism, lower tolerance for alternative viewpoints, and create sectarian rifts within society. When groups of ideologically like-minded citizens come together, rather than engage in rational discourse, group members tend to re-enforce each other's pre-existing opinions, resulting in-group polarization (Sunstein 2001). This phenomenon is caused in part by what Sunstein calls a "limited argument pool": when groups of like-minded people come together to discuss politics, they are not exposed to the whole spectrum of possible arguments, leading to a more extreme consensus following discussion (Sunstein 2001, 68).

Indeed, Habermas' conception of the public sphere has been criticized for just this reason. While the public sphere was intended to include all members of society, the idealized 18th century version was all-male and affluent. As many feminist critics have pointed out, the inclusion of women and other previously disenfranchised groups may lead to legitimate differences of opinion within the public sphere (Calhoun 1992, 35). Habermas expected each subdivision of the public sphere to make its way to the same rational consensus concerning the public good; many of the faults he finds with modern society hinge on democratic society's failure to maintain consensus as a more diverse range of citizens have gained access

to political participation (Calhoun 1992, 16). Habermas himself has admitted that it would be deeply regressive to return to a less inclusive form of democracy: "Any attempt at restoring the liberal public sphere through the reduction of its plebiscitarily expanded form will only serve to weaken even more the residual functions genuinely remaining within it" (Habermas, quoted in Calhoun 1992, 28). In her critique of the Habermasian public sphere, Mouffe outlines a possible alternative to a public sphere fractured into warring ideological factions. In her model of "agonistic pluralism," the key concern for mass participatory democracy is not conformity but rather civil disagreement; in other words, ideological opponents would recognize underlying national or human unity and view each other as the loyal opposition, rather than as existential enemies. In her ideal democracy, participation and discourse would transform political opponents from antagonistic enemies into agonistic adversaries (Mouffe 1999).

Some forms of social capital may do a better job than others in promoting a worldview that includes alternative ideas and tolerates non-group members. In his defense of civic groups as a measure of the strength of a democracy, Putnam distinguishes between two types of social capital: "bonding" and "bridging" capital. Bonding capital represents "strong ties" between relatives, coreligionists, or other exclusive, closely-knit groups. Bridging capital, on the other hand, describes "weak ties" between members of large, diverse groups. As Putnam notes, both forms of capital have their place in democratic societies: bonding capital promotes solidarity and organic social safety networks, while bridging capital allows for cross-cultural ties and healthy information flows within society. However, bonding capital is more likely to promote extremism and "out-group antagonism" than bridging capital (Putnam 2000, 22-24).

Furthermore, Putnam argues, involvement in civic groups would not necessarily decrease members' tolerance for non-members. In Table 1 below, Putnam outlines two possibilities for communities with high social capital. Those with high tolerance for outsiders will be "civic communities," in which differences between various groups are tolerated in the name of the community as a whole. Those with low tolerance, on the other hand, will be "sectarian communities," in which tight-knit groups demonize outsiders within the greater community; he cites the infamous Salem witch trials as an example of such a xenophobic society (Putnam 354-355). In an ideal democracy, small groups would foster bridging capital and bind disparate elements of society together in a discursive civic community.

Table 1: Social Capital and Tolerance: Four Types of Society (Putnam 2000, 355).

	Low Social Capital	High Social Capital
High Tolerance	*Individualistic*: You do your thing and I'll do mine	*Civic Community:* Salem without "witches"
Low Tolerance	*Anarchic:* War of all against all	*Sectarian Community:* In-group vs. out-group; Salem with "witches"

The Media and Participation

Although technology can never be the sole determining factor in the makeup of a society, different media environments can have a profound impact on the ratio of bridging to bonding capital and on the level of political participation and discourse in a society. Some scholars have criticized the 20th century media model of mass broadcasting, particularly television, for impeding democratic discourse and participation. Habermas, in particular, worried that modern citizens passively consumed televised information rather than taking part in informative conversation. As a result, he wrote, citizens were no longer capable of forming a true political will through critical discourse, reducing their participation to the act of "acclamation" or voting (Calhoun 1992, 26).

Putnam has presented compelling evidence that social capital and civic participation declined together with the rise of television in the second half of the 20th century. Voter turnout fell substantially between 1950 and 2000, despite lowered barriers to voting for minorities. Citizens' interest in public affairs dropped by 20% over the last quarter of the 20th century. Party identification, too, dropped steeply, from over 75% in 1960 to 58% in 2011 (Putnam 2000, 32-38; Jones, 2012). Like Habermas, Putnam argued that broadcast media was in part to blame for these trends: television allowed citizens to consume news and entertainment alone in their homes, freeing them from the burden of socializing with their friends and neighbors or joining civic groups. Putnam linked heavy television viewership with lower civic participation: for example, while 39% of light television viewers attended a public meeting on local affairs in 1999, only 25% of heavy television viewers went to such meetings. People who describe television as their "primary form of entertainment" were also less likely to volunteer in their communities, visit friends, host or attend parties, participate in clubs, or give blood than those who did not depend on television for entertainment (Putnam 2000, 229-235).

Some academic optimists have seen the advent of the Internet as a panacea for the broadcast system's propensity to stifle discourse. Particularly in the 1990s, the Internet was seen as a potential utopia of many-to-many communication, independent discourse and thought, grassroots political action, and even a new online social contract (Rheingold 2000; Barlow 1996; Poster 1997, Maltz 1996). Early Internet enthusiasts hoped the web could fulfil the requirements of the Habermasian public sphere: lowered entry and exit costs would allow all citizens to access information about and rationally discuss political issues as equals in "virtual coffeehouses" (Geiger 2009). As in Habermas' ideal public sphere, these conversations would help digital citizens form the political will necessary to meaningfully take part in politics (Maltz 1996).

Unlike Habermas' 18th century version, though, new digital social space welcomes participants of all genders, races, and classes (Poster 1997). In an improvement over the broadcast media system, participants in what Benkler has called the "networked public sphere" would not only educate themselves about the news of the day, but find a space to question mainstream media accounts, see themselves as contributors to political action, and organize for participation without waiting to be told to do so by elites (Benkler 2006). Some empirical studies, too, have offered cause for optimism. In a 2000 experiment, Price and Capella had a random sample of Americans engage in monthly political discussions online. Subjects reported increased political engagement, a greater sense of community, and higher levels of social trust after taking part in the experiment (Price and Capella 2002).

The Internet has been seen as a potential incubator of social capital, as well. The current ascendancy of social media is particularly encouraging. Boyd and Ellison define social network sites, or social media, as online spaces which allow users to broadcast public profiles, define the list of others who can see their profiles and other postings, and easily navigate the postings of members within their networks. Although such sites have existed since the late 1990s, they came to mainstream prominence around 2003, with the rise of Friendster, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Facebook (Boyd and Ellison 2007). While social media is a relatively new phenomenon, Internet utopians have envisioned such a highly social system for years. As early as 1999, Nan Lin suggested that the advent of the Internet could bring about a radical rise in social capital within cyber-networks (Lin 1999, 45). Lin predicted that easier access to information and other people would lead to a bottom-up globalization of social capital, creating an online network of "global villages" (Lin 1999, 45-46).

Later cyber-optimists, too, have seen the Internet as a way to lower barriers to group formation and collective action. Clay Shirky, for example, has argued that the Internet allows likeminded individuals from all over the world to share information and join together in

action, transcending traditional barriers of time and space to create a new "architecture of participation" (Shirky 2008, 148-153). Outside of academia, too, civic-minded entrepreneurs have envisioned the Internet as a possible incubator of social capital: for example, the founders of Meetup.com, which helps people easily set up meetings and events online, explicitly saw their site as a remedy for the decline in face-to-face interaction described in *Bowling Alone* (Wolf, 2004).

However, the tension in participatory theory between fostering rational discourse and forming inclusive social networks has been apparent in scholarly debate over the role of the Internet and social media. One persistent criticism of online discourse has been its potential to fragment society. Whereas the broadcast media has been seen as atomizing, isolating viewers in their homes, it also ensured a shared pool of information among citizens. The Internet, on the other hand, is inherently social; yet the very freedom with which Internet users can meet like-minded people online may allow them to self-filter into homogenous groups, thus excluding certain strains of information (Sunstein 2001). In his 1995 utopian vision of the future, Negroponte dreamed that the broadcast media system would evolve into a digital "Daily Me," in which citizens could personalize their information consumption (Negroponte 1995).

As this flight of fancy turned into a reality, though, other observers became more critical of this phenomenon. 1997 Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson coined the term "cyber-Balkanization" to describe digital citizens' propensity to seek out, not only information, but also new social contacts and groups online that conformed to their preconceived notions about politics and society (Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1997). Social media is particularly problematic: unlike earlier online interactions, these social networks tend to re-enforce and enable real-life ties, rather than encourage users to reach out to strangers (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Many scholars have conceived of these cyber-Balkans as "public sphericules" - that is, fragmented Habermasian discursive arenas, each focused on a narrow range of ideas and failing to encompass the broad spectrum of information and opinion in society as a whole (Gitlin 1998; Goode 2005; Howley 2007). Online groups, therefore, may be more likely to produce limited argument pools and more extreme opinions than their offline counterparts (Sunstein 2001). Some empirical evidence has given credence to these concerns: Adamic and Glance, for example, have shown that liberal and conservative bloggers in the 2004 American presidential election primarily linked to other blogs of the same ideological persuasion, failing to address or expose their readers to alternative points of view (Adamic and Glance, 2005).

Others have defended the Internet from these allegations. In a survey of American chat-room users, Wojcieszak and Mutz showed that chat rooms often did expose participants to opinions they disagreed with, although this was more likely to happen in social or hobby chatrooms than in political, religious, or ethnic spaces (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009). In another survey, Williams showed that time spent online correlated positively with diversity of social connections; in addition, he found that online social interactions were more likely to foster "bridging" than "bonding" social capital (Williams 2007).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Conceptual Framework

Theories of participation, social capital, and the public sphere will form the framework for this investigation into the online milieu of the Tea Party movement. As seen in the discussion above, political participation and inclusiveness are sometimes at odds: the social cohesion required to sustain the participatory discourse envisioned by Habermas may lead, paradoxically, to a public sphere fractured along class or ideological lines into exclusive "public sphericules." This outcome would more closely resemble Putnam's polarized "sectarian society" than his desired tolerant "civic society."

The Internet, as a cheap, user-friendly medium for information sharing, discussion, and social interaction, may exacerbate this tension: digital forms of social capital may on the one hand help draw previously disengaged citizens into online political communities, and on the other hand foster "Balkanized" online echo chambers which fail to expose newly active citizens to a balanced information diet and in fact increase ideological polarization and the demonization of non-group members. While pre-digital citizens encountered a diverse range of opinion, both through broadcast media and through social networks centered on locality rather than shared interests, Internet users today are free to filter both their information and their social ties through the lens of personal taste.

As a new online movement fuelled, at least in part, by the ubiquity of the Internet and social media, the Tea Party provides a fascinating opportunity to observe these tensions in action. A thorough examination of the subjective experiences of Tea Party members can help shed light on the impact of social media on participation, social capital, and tolerance.

Research Questions

Because both the Tea Party movement and social media are so new, my research is necessarily generative: I hope to further develop the frameworks of social capital and the public sphere as they relate to online social movements. Therefore, my first research question is descriptive:

1. Did the social media environment of the Tea Party help to foster political involvement at the level described by theorists of participatory democracy?

My second two research questions are more theoretical, probing beyond social media's ability to increase participation to investigate the quality of that involvement:

2. Can the social media environment of the Tea Party be seen as a public sphere? Specifically, do individuals in the online community seek out, share, and rationally discuss all available information pertaining to the political issues of the day, or shut out alternative points of view to create a Balkanized "public sphericule"?

3. Do Tea Party activists' social media experiences foster the "bridging" social capital that can knit multiple public spheres together and create an inclusive, tolerant "civic community"? Or does the online milieu of the Tea Party promote "bonding" social capital, fostering a low-tolerance "sectarian community?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Strategy

The key concern in designing a research strategy for this study was to understand the motivations and experiences of Tea Party activists as they navigated a possible digital public sphere. Because both the Tea Party and social media use are such new, relatively unstudied phenomena, it was important to choose a methodology that would begin to explore activists' experiences and relationship networks without preconceptions of what might be found. This requirement helped eliminate quantitative approaches such as surveys or content analysis, methods better suited to more developed areas of inquiry. Ethnographic or direct participant observation, too, could be ruled out: the Tea Party movement attracted most of its new political participants over three years ago, rendering this method untimely.

Ultimately, semi-structured individual interviews were chosen as the best way to examine what Bauer et al call the "life worlds" of Tea Party activists (Bauer et al 2000, 39). The interview methodology fulfilled the requirement of openness, allowing for follow up questions when subjects revealed surprising information while maintaining a tight focus on the study's research objectives. At the same time, interviews could provide a rigorous "thick description" of the social and political "milieu" of the Tea Party in greater depth than content analysis or surveys (Bauer et all 2000, 39). Although focus groups could certainly have helped produce insight into the group dynamics of the Tea Party movement (Bauer et al 2000, 46), an in-person group interview could not have accurately recaptured the dynamic of an online community that interacted sporadically over a protracted period.

Sampling and Procedure

Subjects were chosen with a number of objectives in mind. Because the research was not quantitative, no attempt was made to find a representative sample in order to generalize to a larger population; rather, subjects were chosen to maximize the diversity in range of experience and opinion within the population of Tea Party activists (Bauer et al 2000, 41). Thus, while respondents of diverse gender, age, socioeconomic background, and geographic location were chosen, the selection was by no means a representative sample. Instead, it was broken down into subpopulations that were relevant to the Tea Party: long-time Republican or corporate activists, libertarian partisans, and those with no prior interest in politics.

In interviewing potential subjects, though, it became clear that there was considerable overlap between these three groups: specifically, those with longstanding commitment to libertarian ideals generally either had not been involved in politics before, or had a background in traditional Republican politics. As a result, the primary division in the sample was between those with some prior political involvement and those with no prior experience. Within both the activist and the non-activist groups, some respondents had a longstanding commitment to libertarian principles, while others did not. The primary focus was on activists who had not been involved in politics before the Tea Party movement, but some old hands were also included to provide a clearer sense of the difference between the culture of the Tea Party and that of the Republican Party: the decision of veteran activists to abandon or supplement their traditional activity for involvement in the Tea Party provided insight into the unique participatory environment of the new movement. The ten interview subjects can thus be broken up as follows: four Republican old hands, five longstanding libertarian partisans, and six with no prior history of activism (cf. Appendix A).

In order to contact potential research subjects, a random sampling method was combined with a snowballing method of selection. To establish initial contact, I relied on both academic connections with Tea Party groups and cold contact via email with Tea Party leaders listed on locally-based websites. Subjects were interviewed in the following cities: Boston; Los Angeles; Chicago; Marietta, Georgia; and Spartanburg, South Carolina. These locations were chosen for the diversity of their political environments, as measured by their vote share in the 2008 presidential election: 77.5% of Bostonians, 76.2% of Chicagoans, 61.1% of Angelinos, 44.8% of Marietta voters, and 38.6% of Spartanburg voters supported Barack Obama for President in 2008 (USA Today, 2008). The initial respondents in Boston and Los Angeles were able to furnish further contacts from their local Tea Party scene, while the other three initial respondents became stand-alone subjects. This method had both advantages and disadvantages. Because it included activists from a variety of places, the selection covered Tea Party experiences from more than one local chapter and political environment; at the same time, including at least three activists in two of these locations gave a fuller picture of the social interactions and participatory environments at a local level. On the other hand, both initial contact through Tea Party websites or personal recommendations and subsequent referrals to other activists may have biased the data in favor of the most "presentable" Tea Party members. Another method, such as going to Tea Party meetings and attempting to speak with a random sample of attendees, could have ensured the inclusion of extremists or oddballs. However, the method of random contact and snowballing produced a selection of articulate and thoughtful interview subjects from a variety of geographical locations. These subjects were likely able to provide a more reliable and diverse account of the content and meaning of their activism than fringe Tea Party members would have.

Five subjects were interviewed in person, and five over the phone or on Skype. This was not the ideal circumstance: in a pilot project, subjects were easier to read and more willing to engage in person than on the phone. However, since traveling to multiple locations across the country was not an option, the goal of speaking with people from diverse areas in the country had to be prioritized over in-person interviews. Subjects reviewed and signed a consent form informing them of the purpose of the research, asking their permission to record the interview and assuring them that their responses would remain anonymous. Each interview was then recorded and transcribed.

Research Tools

The topic guide was modelled on the episodic interviewing methodology, which was developed as a way to study the impact of technological change on everyday social life. This methodology prompts subjects to recount both concrete, narrative memories and more general attitudes towards the events described, allowing the interviewer to get a sense for both the everyday uses of new technologies and the relationship of these mundane topics with broader areas of interest (Flick 2000). Because it was unclear what role to expect for social media in the Tea Party movement at the outset of this research, interviews began as wide-ranging discussions centered on the everyday use of the Internet and the broad concept of political participation; as more interviews were conducted, the focus was tightened to concrete examples of online discourse and abstract issues of in-group social relationships and tolerance. To establish consistency between interviews, though, four discrete sections were maintained throughout the interview process. The first section encouraged subjects to share personal political narratives, from their political upbringing to their decision to become politically active to their current involvement in the Tea Party. The second section explored subjects' use of the Internet and other media to find and share news and engage in political discussion. In the third section, subjects described the online culture of the Tea Party in particular, from information sharing to political discussions to organizational and logistical methods. Finally, subjects were asked more explicitly to share their general attitudes towards political participation, discourse, group membership, and fellow Americans with opposing viewpoints or life experiences. This topic guide was designed to move from simple to more difficult questions; in addition, beginning with the political narrative gave space for the other three sections to fill in details of subjects' initial accounts of their experiences.

To prepare the best possible data, a method of analysis was chosen in advance. Specifically, a grounded theory of analysis, which Bernard describes as "the discovery of hypotheses from texts," was selected to interpret interview transcripts (Bernard 2000, 456). Again, as it was not obvious in advance what relationship to expect between social media and participation in the Tea Party, it was necessary to choose an analytical method that relied on inductive rather than deductive reasoning: because interpreting interviews is necessarily subjective, it was important to approach transcripts with an "open attitude," avoiding the temptation to twist the data to some preconceived theory (Seidman 1998, 100). Interview transcripts were first read for themes relevant to the research questions and conceptual framework; they were then coded and analyzed according to these themes (Bernard 2000).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis section will be divided into three categories based on the three research questions. After a brief discussion of subjects' level of participation before the Tea Party movement, the first section will focus on the role social media played in drawing subjects into involvement with the Tea Party. In this section, subjects will be separated into two categories: four with prior political involvement, and six with no prior political involvement. Second, the social media environment as described by the interviewees will be analyzed as a public sphere. Specifically, the role of social media in accessing, disseminating, and debating information will be addressed. Here, libertarians and traditional conservatives will be addressed separately. Finally, the impact of online relationships between activists on subjects' sense of group identity will be analyzed. Specifically, subjects' accounts will be probed for evidence of bridging or bonding social capital arising from new online relationships, and for attitudes towards non-group members.

Participation and Social Media

Introduction: Before the Tea Party

Before their involvement in the Tea Party, the six subjects with no history of prior activism closely matched Putnam's description of a disengaged, asocial citizenry. As news consumers, all but one of these subjects relied primarily on televised broadcasts rather than new media; although they did not follow the news closely, these subjects did express a longstanding preference for conservative news sources as opposed to non-partisan or left-leaning sources. Many reported listening to conservative talk radio - either nationally syndicated figures such as Rush Limbaugh or local conservative radio hosts. Even Will, the only disengaged interviewee under 30 and the only one to get some news from social media before joining the Tea Party, reported getting the majority of his information from talk radio. As for television, almost all respondents felt that Fox News was, in Mary's words, "the least bad of all of them." This preference for Fox is not surprising: in a national poll of Tea Party supporters, 63% reported getting most of their political news from the conservative station (Formisano 2012, 109). None of these respondents reported discussing the news with friends, writing letters to the editor, sharing political information online, or otherwise refining or broadcasting their own political views.

The political behavior of these disengaged respondents, too, resembled Putnam and Habermas' vision of a minimally participatory citizenry. While all but one voted regularly, none took their involvement any further. As both Putnam and Habermas feared, these

subjects seemed to see voting as the only possible form of political participation: as Nancy said, "I...did not get involved in campaigns. I didn't understand, really, that you could do that. Other people did do that, but people like me, we didn't do that. We just voted." Most of these subjects considered themselves conservative, but did not have a sophisticated understanding of politics and did not strongly identify with the Republican Party. Liz summed up the general feeling: "I never went deeper than probably the soundbites that the candidates gave...I didn't think of myself as politically anything...I didn't think of myself as a political conservative, I just thought of myself as a conservative person." There was some variation as to self-reported voting patterns: two regularly supported Republican candidates, two reported voting for Jimmy Carter but no other Democrats, and one (Mary) described voting "for who[ever] was not the incumbent." Despite their conservative preferences, though, these subjects did not feel that political participation or even further political education would have an impact, largely because they did not see a difference between the two major parties. Many shared Mary's sentiment that "it almost seems like it doesn't matter what you vote...the whole idea [of both parties] is to get the government's grubby little paws into every little corner of your lives so that you can't sneeze without some government bureaucrat assigning you a tissue." Several subjects were particularly critical of President George W. Bush, whom respondents characterized as a "huge spender" and a "progressive" and blamed for the bank bailouts of 2008.

As Putnam would have predicted, the four subjects with a history of involvement had starkly different habits of news consumption and political behavior. Three of these subjects were under 30; these three got much of their news from online sources.[2] Unlike the disengaged group, the three heavy Internet users both sought out and discussed political information online before the Tea Party movement began. While these subjects did tune in to Fox News and various conservative talk radio programs, they were more likely to come across clips from these shows online, or seek out such clips in order to harvest content for their own social media postings, than to passively watch or listen to the broadcasts as a whole. Nina, for example, was involved in the website PopModal, which she described as a "conservative YouTube" where any video from an Ann Coulter clip to "some cartoon that reminded everyone of the free market" could be posted and discussed, well before the beginning of the Tea Party movement.

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[2] The one exception was Jack, who was over 50 and an elected official; he had followed the news avidly via television and newspapers throughout his life, and now has staff send him the most relevant clips and articles every morning via email.

To most activists with prior political experience, the Tea Party represented an exciting expansion of the libertarian movement and a departure from a disappointing Republican Party. Nina, Jack and Alex, longstanding Republican activists, were not brimming with enthusiasm over the GOP. Before the Tea Party movement, Nina saw the Republican Party as nothing more than a vehicle to bring libertarian ideas into mainstream politics. Jack felt that the Republicans had become more moderate since his early days of involvement, and often found himself at odds with more moderate Republican legislators. Alex saw the Party as a "good old boys club" that could use a stronger dose of libertarianism. For those with a history of libertarian involvement, the Tea Party seemed like a more exciting, popularly appealing version of the pre-existing libertarian movement, rather than a new wing of the Republican Party. Nina, for example, had a sense of being involved in "what would become the Tea Party" long before Obama's election or Santelli's speech. For her, the expansion of the Tea Party beyond the original libertarian core was exciting and empowering: "since I was a little kid, I wanted to be part of something. Now I finally felt like, this is it. This is the thing that I've been supposed to be doing forever." The outlier was David, who felt that his prior involvement was more meaningful than the Tea Party: to him, "the authentic Tea Party was probably the Ron Paul movement." By his account, this "authentic" Tea Party represented a young, diverse, ideologically pure group of libertarian partisans. The later, more popular version of the Tea Party movement was "Fox News'd out" - in other words, dumbed down for mass appeal. The average Tea Party supporter was, in his view, older, less independent, and less interested in conversation than the typical Ron Paul activist.

The Tea Party: An Online Political Awakening?

A mix of earnest grassroots discourse and the broadcast messages of elite conservative opinion makers were at play in sparking the Tea Party movement. Prior political activists and political neophytes alike traced their "conversions" to Tea Party activism to various dramatic events: some began paying more attention to politics during and after the financial meltdown, others after President Obama's election or inauguration, and some after hearing Rick Santelli's famous rant on the floor of the Chicago stock exchange. However, the medium that brought these definitive moments to the respondents' attention varied greatly depending on the subject's prior level of activism.

Those with a history of active political participation generally heard of the Tea Party movement from friends, most often via social media. As a result of their involvement in politics, this group already had networks of conservative social connections, both in person and online. David had both learned the ropes of online political organizing and established political contacts during the Ron Paul campaign in 2007:

> *David*: So you go to Meetup.com, type in your city or your zip code, and type in Ron Paul or libertarian or whatever, and you meet these people. I went over to a guy's house, all by myself...and we're still friends today. We helped radicalize each other and bounce ideas off one another.

This libertarian radicalization, made possible by social media, gave David not only the intellectual tools, but also the social connections to get involved in the Tea Party movement early in 2009.

Libertarian subjects described a brewing sense of discontent within their conservative social networks in the months leading up to the beginning of the national Tea Party movement. For young libertarians like David and Nina, Rick Santelli's rant and other early moments of the Tea Party movement were merely the culmination of the political buzz developing on social media. In the following exchange, Nina described her experience on social media in the wake of President Obama's election:

> *Nina*: I had a lot of conservative and libertarian friends on Facebook. And all of a sudden, people just started getting really active. I don't actually remember before that seeing that kind of political activity on Facebook.
> *Interviewer*: So it was a sort of spontaneous – people you were friends with...started having [political] status updates or linking to articles?
> *Nina*: Yeah, exactly. It was just like a fire all of a sudden. Like whereas everyone was so apathetic about John McCain, but all of a sudden it was like there was a fire that was lit under everyone.

This intensification of online political activity, made possible by pre-existing online networks, gave long-term libertarian activists hope for a potential grassroots movement.

While those with no prior history of activism eventually turned to social media to express their concerns, these subjects typically first heard of the Tea Party movement through the mainstream media, particularly Fox News. Rick Santelli's rant resonated deeply with many of these respondents, who typically saw it on Fox or heard it on a talk radio program. Nancy, for example, recalled her sense of impending doom in the months following the financial meltdown, and her frustration with what she saw as an irresponsible response on the part of elected officials; to her, Santelli was the first person to give voice to her political feelings:

> *Nancy*: It resonated with me because in the six months leading up to his rant, I had become very aware of politics...I didn't know what the heck we were going to do, I was terrified, I was scared, I was angry. It was a very dark time. And when he said what he said I remember ... standing up and pointing to the TV ... I go 'YEAH! THAT! THAT! THAT!' I was real excited,

because somebody was putting into words the angst that I was feeling and didn't have the words for it.

For first-time participants like Nancy, then, social media did not serve as an initial impetus to act; instead, broadcast accounts of dissatisfaction with the political consensus under the Obama administration inspired newcomers to pay more attention to politics and seek out likeminded conservatives.

Once they had resolved to take a more active part in politics, though, newcomers often sought out the social media hubs populated by libertarian partisans. For example, George, who became interested in politics after closely following the debate over President Obama's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in the newspaper and on social media, took to Twitter in 2009 to discuss the bill with fellow citizens. He followed the Illinois Tea Party and various Tea Party members on Twitter, and engaged in "lively open debates on the public stream" through his social media feeds. In 2010, a coordinator from a local Tea Party chapter found George on Twitter and asked him to speak at a Tea Party event; from then on, George has been involved in the leadership of that chapter. This experience was fairly typical for political newcomers: once their interest in politics was piqued by controversial news stories, they discovered and embraced a community of likeminded conservatives on the Internet.

While both broadcast media and pre-existing online networks were crucial in sparking the Tea Party movement, social media did perform an important role in linking newly politically aware conservatives with libertarian networks across the country. Indeed, all subjects from both groups were in agreement that the Tea Party could not have existed without the Internet. As George said, older methods of sharing information and bringing together a movement, such as the telephone, were "not gonna cut it."

Public Sphere or Public Sphericule? Accessing, Sharing, and Debating Information

As can be seen from the discussion above, the political discourse that took place over social media in Tea Party networks was in itself a form of political participation. However, it remains to be seen whether this discourse met the standards of a Habermasian public sphere. An assessment of Tea Party members' methods of gathering, sharing, and discussing political information shows a vibrant online public sphere created through a complex interplay between new activists and more sophisticated libertarians. On the one hand, membership in the Tea Party movement seemed to polarize online social media feeds that both libertarians and traditional conservatives relied on for news; even as many activists gained depth of

knowledge and understanding, some lost touch with alternative political points of view as liberal friends were weeded out of their information streams. In other words, despite its sophistication, the online information environment of the Tea Party came to resemble Sunstein's "limited argument pool" for some participants. On the other hand, despite this cyber-Balkanization, most subjects remained aware of and interested in alternative points of view and sources of information. Despite its limitations, then, social media did seem to foster a legitimate public sphere.

While online social networks came to play an increasingly important role in information gathering for traditional conservatives, these subjects remained relatively passive in their news consumption, relying on mainstream conservative media and their online social networks to keep up with the news of the day, but rarely delving deeper into philosophy. For the most part, these activists' networks became increasingly polarized as the Tea Party movement progressed. George, for example, gets most of his news from following the Twitter hashtag "TCoT," for Top Conservatives on Twitter. Predictably, this feed exposes him almost exclusively to conservative points of view. Liz gets much of her news from subscription email blasts from conservative sources such as the Herman Cain presidential campaign; while she knows that she "should" investigate liberal perspectives as well, she generally cannot find time to do so.

Traditional conservatives not only sought out more information than they had previously, but also shared and discussed their findings with their own followers. Almost all these subjects described "re-sharing," "sending out," or "posting" information about their newfound political convictions. After reading the healthcare reform act, for example, George joined forces with other Tea Party health care experts to "educate the public on what was in the legislation." Nancy, too, saw it as her job to keep her members up to date: she not only tweeted and updated her website up to twelve times a day, but sometimes called members who were not plugged into social media to make sure they had heard about important events.

Libertarians were more drawn to substantive or theoretical books and blogs than were traditional conservatives. All libertarian subjects reported extensive reading of libertarian philosophers, from Ayn Rand to Ludwig von Mises, both before and during their involvement in the Tea Party. Many of these subjects preferred books and in-depth magazine or blog articles to daily news: Mary, for example, reported that her reading list was fifty books long, leaving her with little time for daily news. For the most part, libertarians did not rely on social media for guidance; instead, they looked to the established canon of conservative thinkers and explored from there.

Although much of libertarians' information came from traditional books or long-form blog articles, rather than social media feeds, social media did make it easier for these activists to share their points of view with new Tea Party activists; by disseminating their findings with their expanded conservative audience, libertarians improved the tone and depth of Tea Party information networks. Unlike many members of her generation, Nina first joined Facebook in 2009; for her, the primary purpose of joining was to develop an audience for her libertarian ideas. Alex reported posting substantive articles to Facebook, Twitter, and his local Tea Party chapter website. Libertarian partisans also used the Internet to engineer in-person discussion of their ideas. Mary, for example, organized a constitutional study group that has met monthly for the past two and a half years; she relies on email to contact 100 group members, about a quarter of whom show up in person each month to discuss sections of the Constitution and articles from the Federalist papers. David heard of an April 2009 rally through social media contacts, and attended in order to discuss the philosophical issues of taxation with the other attendees:

> *David*: It was basically a tax rally, and that's what I wanted to go and talk to people about, was talk to them about 'What is a tax?' 'Do people have a right to tax you?' 'What gives them that right?' 'What legitimizes a tax?' And just have a discussion about it, and then, also talk about the Federal Reserve and money itself.

As for the phenomenon of polarization, libertarians and traditional conservatives alike described losing left-leaning friends over their affiliation with the Tea Party; this social dynamic between Tea Party activists and their liberal friends led to a gradual exclusion of alternative ideological viewpoints from the online milieu of the movement. Interestingly, most subjects described their liberal friends as the instigators of these political splits: many subjects accused their liberal opponents of engaging in ad hominem attacks, insults, and bullying. For example, Beth described arguing over politics with a friend's husband on Facebook. When this man was unable to have a debate without "name-calling," Beth unfriended him; her original friend then dropped her, both on Facebook and in real life. For others, political differences with friends were handled more subtly: several subjects described ignoring, unsubscribing from, or unfriending acquaintances who regularly posted left-leaning political information or arguments on social media sites. To be sure, some subjects maintained diverse online connections. Describing his social media feeds, David said that "posts are pretty all over the place, I've got Obama people, and I've got right wingers and whatever, and a lot of conspiracy retards unfortunately." However, most subjects were not regularly exposed to liberal points of view on their social media feeds, which for many traditional conservatives represented a primary source of political information.

Despite the absence of liberal perspectives within their social media networks, though, both traditional conservatives and libertarians sought out rational debate with those with divergent views on both sides of the ideological spectrum; social media often made it easier to engage in such debates without rancor. George, for example, made a point of seeking out "those who are not of my political persuasion" on Twitter to discuss health care reform. These discussions do not seem to have moderated George's political beliefs: he could not recall an instance when he had changed his mind on an issue during such debates. Still, George cannot be accused of failing to venture outside the comforts of a limited argument pool. For many subjects, rational dialogues with opponents seemed more possible online than in person. Beth, for example, described a prolonged debate she engaged in over the Michael Moore movie "Sicko," which took place in the comment section of the film's profile on Amazon.com. Although she had to wade through a number of insulting comments before finding a rational debate partner, Beth felt that it was important to engage in that one conversation:

> *Beth*: There was one guy who after I got him to stop calling me names, we actually had a conversation back and forth where we talked about different things, and we ended it with 'thank you for taking the time to explain your views...' Not that we changed each other's minds, but yeah, I didn't feel like it was a waste of my time.

David also felt that it was easier to get past "distraction issues" with fellow conservatives with whom he disagreed online than in person:

> *David*: There's some Republicans, like mainstream Republicans that are in my local party, and I'll want to comment on their stuff, cause I'm always really nice to them at meetings and stuff, and I don't try to make a scene or make a big debate about whatever, cause we only get to see each other once in a while. But online I'll take the liberty to talk about Israel and Palestine if they don't want to...

In other words, while those with divergent opinions were not included in Tea Party social media streams, activists continued to seek out and debate deviants from libertarian orthodoxy.

In addition to engaging with ideological opponents, some subjects sought out unfiltered information, going straight to such direct sources as pieces of legislation and public records. George's first act of political involvement was to read all 2400 pages of the health care reform bill, rather than relying on other conservatives' accounts of the legislation. Many subjects emphasized such behavior as desirable; indeed, Beth characterized the Tea Party as an educational avenue with a duty to "inspire people to ... access public records to find out

what's going on behind the scenes in the State House, to go to your city council meetings and school board meetings."

In sum, while the online milieu of the Tea Party in many ways represented a Balkanized "public-sphericule," subjects independently sought out debate partners, alternative points of view, and original source material. Indeed, the very enthusiasm for political affairs that kept subjects engaged in the online Tea Party social network seemed to protect them from an apathetic reliance on their one-sided social media feeds.

Social Capital: Civic or Sectarian Community?

One important factor in determining the nature of the social capital created in the movement is subjects' level of tolerance towards non-group members. While Putnam found that members of civic groups displayed high tolerance for racial and gender equality (Putnam 2000, 356), this study is more concerned with tolerance for those of opposing political beliefs; as Mouffe pointed out, antagonism between ideological opponents can lead to serious rifts within society, which political participation can either exacerbate or mitigate. Because the Tea Party is a fairly ideologically homogenous group, this form of tolerance seems particularly pertinent. However, while this study originally aimed to examine Tea Party members' tolerance for ideological opponents, the topic of ethnic tolerance has arisen so regularly in both secondary research and in the interviews themselves that it cannot be ignored. In this section, I will first address the role of social media in expanding social capital for Tea Party members; I will then examine subjects' level of tolerance for Americans excluded from this new online community on the grounds of both ideology and ethnicity.

Involvement in the Tea Party guaranteed new social connections for all subjects; social media was key to this expansion in social capital. Indeed, several subjects described an "explosion" in their online social networks following certain dramatic events, including President Obama's election, Rick Santelli's rant, and the passage of the health care reform bill in 2009. As described above, social media feeds were a key source of information and discussion for Tea Party members; as online social networks quickly expanded, activists felt increasingly informed and empowered. Nina even compared the phenomenon to the powerful 2009 Arab Spring movements:

> *Nina*: It was weird, because after [Obama's election] I would always be getting friend requests from conservatives. It was this consolidation. It was like oh, you know this person, you know 20 people, I know 20 people, let's be friends. It was sort of consolidating everyone's network.
> *Interviewer*: So like lowered barriers to meeting conservatives on the Internet?

> *Nina*: Exactly. Yes. In a way it was like, we need to create this net, this Facebook net all around the country. I guess it was the same thing that probably happened in Egypt when everyone was putting together the protests.

At first glance, these new connections seem to be examples of "bridging" rather than "bonding" capital: rapid expansion of online social networks seem to point to weak ties allowing for cross-cultural information flows. However, the expansion of the network along ideological lines may indicate the opposite: by joining forces with fellow conservatives in a political struggle, Tea Party activists may have instead fostered bonding capital and an antagonistic attitude towards opponents. New online connections tended to be based on shared ideology and mutual friends, rather than a more inclusive conception of the nation or humanity as a whole. David described the typical Facebook friend request in the days following the passage of the health care reform bill as coming from "people … with the eagle crying and the American flag waving behind 'em with the World Trade Center towers crumbling or whatever, and just like, 'Hi, my name's Patriot McUncle-Sam, will you add me as a friend?'" Like Nina, his enthusiasm about his new connections was based largely on his desire for a specifically conservative social network. This preference for likeminded connections may indicate the formation of "bonding" capital and a sectarian community hostile to ideological outsiders.

Subjects' attitudes towards the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement can serve as a helpful shorthand in determining the Tea Party movement's level of tolerance for ideological opponents. OWS shared many principles with the Tea Party, including opposition to bank bailouts, mistrust of concentrated power, and the value of direct political participation; however, because the two movements fall on opposite sides of the political aisle, they have often been portrayed as enemies. Subjects' opinions about OWS activists therefore represent a litmus test of their level of tolerance for fellow Americans who are not members of the Tea Party group, and who could plausibly be seen as allies, legitimate opponents, or hated enemies of the movement.

Generally, Tea Party members saw OWS activists as legitimate opponents: subjects were not convinced by the OWS approach to problem solving, but recognized an affinity with some of OWS' goals and did not react with hostility to the rival group. David reported having interesting discussions with OWS activists, both online and in person; Nina empathized with the economic pain that drove participants in both movements. George described being invited to debate an OWS activist as part of a university's government class, and ultimately finding common ground with his opponent. Indeed, he acknowledged that the bank bailouts that were a partial motivation for both movements had happened under President Bush, not President Obama. Later, George admiringly described a video that provided a step-by-step

rebuttal to the OWS argument that higher taxes for the wealthy would solve many of the country's problems; however, he never had anything derogatory to say about OWS activists or their motivations. Subjects' primary objection to OWS was its unruliness: as Mary said, "they want to tear down the whole house," whereas the Tea Party merely wanted to fix the plumbing of the "house." However, subjects did not seem to see OWS as an existential threat. In this instance, then, the Tea Party movement seems to represent a civic, rather than sectarian, community.

While this study did not significantly probe issues of race, tolerance for perceived ethnic outsiders did come up often enough to merit comment. Some observers have seen the Tea Party's hostility towards President Obama as racially motivated. About 5% of the signs and posters on display at the 2009 "9/12 Taxpayer March" made some derogatory mention of President Obama's race or religion (Gardner 2010). More pervasively, Tea Party supporters have been shown to hold noticeably different views on race than average Americans: for example, 52% of Tea Partiers believed that "too much has been made of the problems facing black people," as opposed to 28 % of Americans at the same time. In addition, 25% of Tea Partiers felt that the Obama administration favored blacks over whites, as compared to 11% of the general public (New York Times/CBS News 2010).

Again, while this study did not set out to investigate racial tolerance, many respondents independently brought up what they considered to be unfair allegations of racism within the Tea Party movement, although none admitted to encountering or harboring racist sentiments. George, for example, felt that Tea Party activists would be called racist if they "dare criticize the President…if they question the President's policies." However, he firmly denied such charges, saying "I don't care if he's polka-dot…It's his policies." George also claimed never to have met racist people at Tea Party events. Two subjects, Will and Nina, belonged to ethnic minorities; while these two were the most disillusioned with the Tea Party, neither mentioned race as a factor in their disappointment. Will, an African-American, did mention the Tea Party's "irrational vilification" of President Obama as a factor in his decision to drop out of the movement, but did not specifically point to race.

While none of the subjects seemed explicitly motivated by racial resentment, some seemed to harbor a strong and specific understanding of what it means to be American, and to feel hostility towards those in the "out-group." One subject, Liz, was a potential candidate for closet racism, expressing frustration with Hispanic Americans' alleged failure to assimilate and only grudgingly acknowledging President Obama's status as an American:

> *Liz*: He wasn't really brought up as a real American, um, he, he was probably born in Hawaii. But his formative years were spent in Indonesia, and, Hawaii is different from the United States.... Hawaii is not like living in mainland.

However, Liz went on to off-handedly mention Herman Cain, an African-American, as her favorite candidate in the 2012 Republican presidential primary. Her objection to President Obama seemed to focus less on his race and more on what she perceived as his atypical upbringing; in other words, her comments are better understood as xenophobic than racist. A few other subjects' comments on illegal immigrants and President Obama's background indicated a similar attitude. George, for example, described President Obama's former pastor Jeremiah Wright as "a guy who's been very much anti-military, anti-America, at least to those outside of his parish that listen in." As this quote demonstrates, George saw President Obama and Reverend Wright as part of a different group than those Americans outside Wright's community. Again, though, as the interviews did not delve deeply into this topic, it is difficult to say whether subjects' social media use affected their attitudes towards these members of ethnic or cultural out-groups.

The Tea Party's status as a civic or sectarian community, then, remains uncertain. On the one hand, subjects' tolerance for OWS activists seems to suggest a mindset of fellowship with other Americans despite political difference; on the other hand, some subjects' remarks on race and immigration suggest a troubling xenophobia within the movement. Further study would be needed to provide a more complete picture of Tea Party members' attitudes towards outsiders.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has attempted to paint a picture of the online culture of the Tea Party movement. Although broadcast media and pre-existing social networks laid the foundation of the Tea Party, it is clear from this study that social media played an important role in allowing the grassroots and the grasstops to connect, thus enabling a powerful successor to previous, feebler libertarian movements. This new movement was largely in line with the Habermasian vision of the public sphere. While social media networks did create an ideologically homogenous environment, many subjects were more likely to venture outside this cozy nest of conservatism after becoming involved in the Tea Party than they had been before the movement: subjects' newfound enthusiasm for politics impelled them to seek out conflicting accounts, debate partners, and unbiased primary sources. The Internet was instrumental in enabling such research and discourse.

Despite expanding social networks based primarily on ideological cohesion, subjects also displayed a high degree of tolerance for activists with alternative political philosophies, specifically members of the Occupy Wall Street movement. However, some subjects' attitudes towards those they considered un-American implied a willingness to deny certain citizens equal status in public debates. This final observation represents a troubling coda to an otherwise commendable online public sphere; further study would be needed to fully explain the role of social media in fostering these specific sectarian tendencies.

These findings have implications for political movements beyond the Tea Party. Putnam, Habermas, and other luminaries of political theory have fretted over tensions between rationality and participation: it has sometimes seemed that mass participation is only possible when passions run high enough to call rationality into question. However, as the example of the Tea Party shows, political enthusiasm does not necessarily lead to the exclusion or complete demonization of alternative viewpoints; online political movements, in particular, allow citizens to develop a passion for collective action and political participation while at the same time lowering barriers for seeking out, publishing, and discussing alternative information and theories. On the other hand, the potential openness of social media networks does not completely protect social movements from developing exclusionary bonding capital and somewhat xenophobic attitudes.

Further research would help clarify this picture of online social movements. In particular, a statistical analysis of Tea Party members' views on race and what it means to be American could help clarify the movement's role in fostering civic or sectarian community. In addition, quantitative analysis could build on the framework here established to provide a more robust

causal link between social media use, political enthusiasm, and attitudes towards alternative theories and ideological opponents.

As in any study relying on inductive research methodology, more data was generated for this project than could be analyzed in such a short paper. The interviews conducted for this study also revealed fascinating patterns in subjects' attitudes towards gay marriage, the mainstream media, and professional political organizers, among other topics. The Tea Party movement has proven itself to be a useful case study for scholars of the Internet, social movements, and political participation, and should be studied further while it remains active.

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APPENDIX A: PROFILES OF SUBJECTS

Name[3]	Tea Party Involvement	Age Group	Location	Prior GOP affiliation	Prior libertarian affiliation	Prior political participation
Nina	Attended and spoke at rallies; ran unsuccessfully for Congress with Tea Party support in 2010; no longer affiliated with the movement	Under 30	LA	Yes	Yes	Yes
Will	Attended rallies and participated in online conversations before dropping out early in the movement	Under 30	LA	No	Yes	No
David	Attends Tea Party rallies; has volunteered on recent Tea Party electoral campaigns	Under 30	LA	No	Yes	Yes
Mary	Leads monthly constitutional study groups; attends rallies and meetings; has worked on Tea Party electoral campaigns	30-50	Boston	No	Yes	No
Beth	Holds a leadership position in local Tea Party chapter; attends rallies and meetings	30-50	Boston	No	No	No
Alex	Manages a Tea Party website; attends rallies and meetings	Under 30	Boston	Yes	No	Yes
Liz	Attends meetings; volunteered for several recent Tea Party electoral campaigns	Over 50	Boston	No	No	No
George	Lectures on the details of the Obama healthcare legislation; campaigned for Tea Party candidates; attends meetings	30-50	Chicago	No	No	No

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[3] Participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Jack	Republican elected official since 2004, recently allied with the Tea Party against Republican old guards	Over 50	Marietta, GA	Yes	No	Yes
Nancy	Holds leadership position in her local Tea Party organization; attends rallies and meetings	30-50	Spartan-burg, SC	No	No	No

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