WhatsApp…ening to Political Discussion?

Mobile Instant Messaging and Political Engagement in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom

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Abstract:

The use of mobile instant messaging services (MIMS) has grown impressively across the globe during the last few years. MIMS are thus emerging as crucial digital intermediaries that might have a relevant impact on how citizens (as well as what types of citizens) are informed about and engage with politics online. This paper explores this issue by presenting unique data on the political use of MIMS in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom from online surveys on samples \(N=1,750\) for each country) representative of internet users.

First, we show that in the three countries robust percentages of our respondents who use MIMS employ them for discussing political matters. Secondly, we show that users who tend to censor themselves politically on social networking sites (SNS) are more likely to discuss politics with others on MIMS. Finally, we investigate the relationship between political discussion on MIMS and traditional modes of political participation, and assess whether this relationship is moderated by political discussion on SNS and offline. We find evidence that political conversation on MIMS is associated with higher levels of political participation and that this relationship is stronger for those who discuss politics almost exclusively via messages on their mobile phones than for those who combine it with political discussion on SNS or offline.

Keywords: Mobile Instant Messaging, social media, political participation, self-censorship