

# Who are those Green Guys? Understanding Online Activism in Chile from a Communicational Perspective

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## **Abstract**

The primary objective of this study is to understand how activists in Chile are using the Internet and social media to learn about large-scale environmental projects and to make their voices heard in this new scenario via Facebook groups on the subject, by watching videos on YouTube, and posting their opinions on these issues. Through a survey that represents the Chilean population of online users, the study provides a view of these activists, explaining the differences and similarities among those who use social media for such purposes.

## **Keywords**

Chile, Internet, social survey, social change, mass media. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

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# ¿Quiénes son esos “Chicos verdes”?

## Activismo en línea en Chile desde la perspectiva de la comunicación

### **Resumen**

El principal objetivo de esta investigación es entender cómo los activistas en Chile están utilizando internet y los medios sociales para informarse sobre mega proyectos medioambientales, y para opinar en este nuevo escenario a través de grupos en Facebook sobre el tema, mirando videos en YouTube, y dando su opinión sobre estos temas. A través de una encuesta que representa la población chilena de usuarios online, la investigación entrega una visión sobre estos activistas, explicando las diferencias y similitudes entre la población que está utilizando los medios sociales para estos propósitos.

### **Palabras clave**

Chile, internet, encuesta social, transformación social, medios de comunicación de masas. (Fuente: Tesaurus de la Unesco).

# Quem são esses “meninos verdes”? Ativismo online no Chile a partir da perspectiva da comunicação

## **Resumo**

O principal objetivo desta pesquisa é entender como os ativistas no Chile estão utilizando a internet e os meios sociais para se informar sobre megaprojetos meio ambientais e para opinar nesse novo cenário por meio de grupos no Facebook sobre o tema, assistindo a vídeos no YouTube e dando sua opinião a respeito desses temas. Por meio de uma enquete que representa a população chilena de usuários on-line, esta pesquisa entrega uma visão sobre esses ativistas e explica as diferenças e similitudes na população que está utilizando os meios sociais para esses propósitos.

## **Palavras-chave**

Chile, internet, enquete social, transformação social, meios de comunicação de massas. (Fonte: Tesouro da Unesco).

During the last few years and specifically since the Arab Spring, there have been growing discussions about Internet activism and how social media have been used effectively by a variety of political and social movements (Harlow & Harp, 2012). As many authors argue, the Internet is offering social movements and activist groups a chance to reconfigure the political sphere (Kahn & Kellner, 2004), strengthening not only their visibility, but also their social and political agency. This approach regards the Internet as a tool for greater public participation, particularly in relation to democracy and political discussion (Harp, Bachmann, & Guo, 2012). In fact, the relevant literature concludes that particular motives (i.e., informational usage; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001) and forms (e.g., email; Shah et al., 2005) of Internet use do lead to increased interpersonal communication about political issues (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), which in turn spurs civic engagement (Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard & Nisbet, 2004) and increases political knowledge (Eveland, Hayes, Shah, & Kwak, 2005), self-efficacy (Jun, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011), and political participation (Kwak et al., 2005).

These participatory effects are relevant today, given the emerging social media and other user-driven platforms that rely on interactive information-sharing, user-generated content, user-centered design, and collaboration. The horizontal interpersonal communication capabilities that are highly embedded in these Web 2.0-based applications, which facilitate citizens' ability to rebroadcast content (e.g., news) by adding personal commentaries, enhance the capacity for discussion, engagement, and promotion of a "two-step flow" of information (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson, 2001; Katz & Rice, 2002). Furthermore, with the arrival of these Web 2.0-based applications, new channels of communication have begun to be crucial for awareness and many kinds of protests, giving social movements and activists the power of mass communication (Postmes & Brunsting 2002, p. 294). Existent research offers mainly two reasons why social media may be strengthening activism (Harlow & Harp, 2012; Karpf, 2010; Reber & Kim, 2006; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Wall, 2007). First, scholars argue the use of social media is helping social movements to make local causes known to distant audiences. Secondly, through these new tools, activists can improve their logistical communication to organize more and better protests on the ground.

Latin America represents a very unique example for the study of this phenomenon. Although it is a region with less Internet penetration than the United States and Europe (Internet World Stats, 2011), its engagement on a number of topics such as environmental and educational issues, through the Internet in general and social media in particular, is consistently strong. In fact, one of the first cases of early adoption and successful use of the Internet by activists to broadcast and tailor their own messages to a global audience occurred in the early 1990s on the part of the indigenous EZLN Zapatista movement in the Chiapas region of Mexico (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Several studies in the region have found that historical offline participation is being enhanced through online engagement (Harlow & Harp, 2012). One illustrative example is a video that surfaced online in Guatemala in 2009 of a lawyer named Rodrigo Rosenberg. In the video, Rosenberg blamed Guatemalan president Alvaro Colom for his murder. The clip went viral and pushed dozens of young citizens to create Facebook pages in support of Rosenberg, which received thousands of visits and comments. Two days later, the new “online movement” had organized several “offline” protests with more than 50,000 attendants calling for President Colom to resign, (Harlow, 2011).

Many other events have occurred over the last few years that represent an increased force of activism that mixes online and offline participation. Although there are several cases in the region where online activism organized through social network sites (SNSs) gave birth to offline activism that took to the streets, Chile is a particularly interesting case study. In contrast with social movements in North America and Europe, public protest in Chile has been quite successful in bringing about legal and policy changes (Valenzuela, Arriagada & Schelmann, 2012). Furthermore, one subject that is particularly sensitive for Chileans is environmental awareness and “moral fight” against major energy projects that can jeopardize the country’s natural well-being. Scholars regard the August 2010 protest against the Barrancones Power Plant as the turning point in that sense (García & Torres, 2011; Valenzuela et al. 2012). As García and Torres (2011) explain, in the two days following approval of the project by the country’s environmental agency, 118 Facebook groups against Barrancones were created, garnering

more than 25,700 “Likes” and 177,450 “Fans”. At the same time, 3,000-plus citizens — coordinated via Facebook and, to a lesser degree, through Twitter—marched to the presidential palace in Santiago, demanding Piñera fulfill his campaign promise that no power plants would be built in environmentally sensitive areas. Yet, what is interesting is the President’s reaction to the recent online-offline movement: the next day, Piñera announced he had overridden the agency’s approval and personally asked the company to relocate the plant (Valenzuela et al., 2012).

This paper aims to understand more about “activists” who use the Internet and social media, first to inform themselves about these projects, and then to participate in this new deliberative scenario by creating Facebook pages, posting comments, watching videos on YouTube, and giving their opinions about such topics. Using data from a survey of a national representative sample of online Chileans, this research offers a look at these protesters by explaining the differences and similarities among the online population that is using social media for these purposes. This study also seeks to expand the literature by investigating possible relationships between online activism and variables related to media consumption, demographics, education, use of technology and many other aspects. It fills an important void in our current understanding of the topic and is significant for its contribution to a broader understanding of online activists in Chile who are using the Internet and SNSs to send messages, organize protests, and to try to place environmental issues on local agenda.

## Literature Review

In the last few years, use of the Internet and social media to obtain political information in Latin America has grown consistently (Valenzuela et al., 2012). Chile is not the exception. According to Comscore (2011), more than 90% of Internet users in Chile have social media accounts, and there is evidence in both developed and developing countries that social media users also are people who engage in civic and political activities, including protest behavior (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011; Valenzuela et al. 2012; Yun & Chang, 2011). Furthermore, Valenzuela et al. (2012) found that individuals in Chile who spend more time reading online news

are more likely to engage in protest activities. This is consistent with the overall trend towards online news media being predictors of political action (Boulianne, 2009). For example, research shows the Internet is offering new opportunities for diverse and marginalized voices to express themselves, potentially contributing to a strengthening of press freedom in Latin America (Harlow, 2012). Moreover, activists in Latin America are relying increasingly on online communication to express opinions and successfully mobilize individuals and communities who share their social concerns (Harp et al., 2012). Scholars emphasize the Internet's provision of immediate information, availability of diverse viewpoints, ability to customize content and to find more detailed data as the main reasons why there is a high preference for this medium when it comes to political information (Shah, Cho, EVELAND, & Kwak, 2005). However, the new online environment, based heavily on Web 2.0 applications, not only opened up opportunities for citizens to obtain more customized news and to learn about events in a timely manner. It also made information consumption a user-centered process that relies on interactive information-sharing platforms.

Within this new user-centered atmosphere, SNSs have become a growing phenomenon. Traditionally defined as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), SNSs' popularity is rising steadily. By late 2008, MySpace and Facebook each had 60 million users and accounted for 6%-8% of all time spent online (Smith, 2009); whereas, in March 2013, Facebook reported more than a billion users (Facebook, 2013). Similarly, LinkedIn, a website catering to professional workers, quadrupled its size to more than 25 million members in one year (Lafayette, 2008) and, by March 2013, it had more than 200 million users (LinkedIn, 2012). Twitter recently celebrated its seventh birthday and proclaimed a total of 180 million users and more than 350 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2013); whereas YouTube announced that over four billion videos were viewed per day and said it had more than one billion users per month (YouTube, 2013).

Literature grounded in human computer interaction and communication disciplines identifies four unique elements of this new set of web applications (Boyd & Ellison 2007; Lerman, 2007b; Sundar, 2008). First, with the arrival of new personal broadcasting technologies, the traditional sender-receiver model of communication developed for the mass media was altered, allowing users not only to be considered audiences, but also to become active “senders” and content-generators (Sundar, 2008). Second, in these social network platforms, users not only create content, they also categorize collectively the information found on the Web (Golder & Huberman, 2006), which gives users the capability to tag all types of data and to annotate relevant information for future retrieval. Third, SNS users are constantly evaluating content. Although social tagging systems can help to organize the content generated by millions of users per day and to search for data more efficiently, the problem in the social media era is not only how to categorize information, but rather how users can swiftly move through very large sets of data and select the pieces that are relevant to them (Hanani, Shapira, & Shoval, 2001). And, fourth, users also are able to form social networks through these new applications, by creating a profile within a bounded system and designating other users with similar interests as contacts, followers, fans, viewers, or friends (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

One of the main differences with virtual communities is that SNS users have their own group of contacts, which can be added to their profile by sending them requests for “friendship”. When the other party agrees, the relationship is displayed in the network of friends (Ultz, 2010). In contrast, with other SNSs, such as Twitter, reciprocity is not necessary: top users, according to the number of followers, are mostly celebrities and they do not follow their followers in return. For example, 67.6% of users are not followed by any of their followings, and only 22.1% have reciprocal relationships with them (Kwak, Lee, Park & Moon, 2010).

## News Consumption and Social Media

For democratic theorists, a good citizen is an informed citizen (Dahl, 1989). As many studies suggest, people rely on news media to monitor government performance by acquiring political information and understanding the po-

litical world (Chaffee et al., 1977; Carpini et al., 2004). Following a normative perspective, scholars traditionally have highlighted the importance of the media in providing information that enables citizens to make informed decisions about candidates, politicians, and issues (Schultz, 1998). Based on rational theories of behavior in which the cost of information is an important factor in shaping actors' political strategies (Downs, 1957; Schumpeter, 1947), behaviorists assume the lower the cost and the greater the accessibility of political information, the higher the aggregate level of citizen engagement will be (Bimber, 2001). With the advent of Web 2.0-based applications, news media now facilitate content access (news) via invitations made by audiences. In fact, users today do not need to visit a news medium or a political website to access information; rather, they may be "invited" by their contacts to gain access to that information on their own SNSs. In other words, although interaction between the media and audiences is still vertical in direction (as a channel of unidirectional mass communication), the horizontal communication capabilities embedded in these social applications allow users to rebroadcast content (e.g., news) and to "share" information with others. Furthermore, based on rational theories of behavior, it is possible to argue that, compared to other channels, social media's accessibility for information consumption (e.g., news sharing with only one click or being notified by contacts), combined with lower costs for dialogue initiation (e.g., co-presence is not needed and networks are potentially "available" 24/7), may facilitate news consumption and political discussion. Verba et al. (1995) explain that, when the barriers for participation are high, only the most interested individuals engage civically.

In fact, research shows these participatory possibilities afforded by social media are encouraging and empowering average citizens to share their voices (Katz & Rice, 2002; Leung, 2009). More than a third of American Internet users are contributing to the creation and/or dissemination of news via their social media channels (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011), and a significant portion of users select their news sources based on whether they can "share" the site's content with others. Rainie et al. (2011) reported that 44% of online news consumers only visit news sites if they can share the content. This implies that a substantial number of users have become

involved with sources of news, thus further mediating the relationship between the original source and other consumers. Moreover, SNS users do not necessarily have to be “invited” personally by others to access information broadcasted by the news media. Members within a person’s network on Facebook, for example, are automatically notified of that material then their contacts make a comment, simply “like” a news story, or consume any other information. Similarly, when users visit news websites that have integrated Facebook into their platform, such as CNN.com, they can see which news stories have been read and evaluated by their contacts and by other users. As Hampton, Lee and Her (2011) suggest, Web 2.0-based applications, such as the “status update” offered by many social networking services, afford opportunities for “pervasive awareness,” whereby individuals are regularly broadcasting and receiving information from their networks.

Consequently, based on the idea that it is through the media that citizens acquire information about issues and learn of opportunities to participate, and given research showing dissemination of political information through the mass media as being related positively to political and civic participation, it is relevant to understand whether individuals who consume news about environmental issues also will exhibit higher levels of online activism. Similarly, drawing from rational theories of behavior, it also is expected that higher levels of accessibility to such information will lead users to consume more social media content about these issues. Furthermore, since social media facilitate access to news information through contact notifications and horizontal communication, it is anticipated that social media users will be more exposed to news content about environmental issues than those who rely on offline and traditional online media. Thus, the following is expected.

- *H1a: Consumption of news through social media will be related positively to time spent on social media.*
- *H1b: Consumption of news through social media will be related positively to online activism.*
- *SNS as a catalyst for online activism*

Additionally, since users of SNSs receive news stories from their networks without necessarily being exposed (directly) to the original content, they might be socially influenced by their networks and process the information differently. More specifically, research shows that when other users are attributed as the source of online news, audiences enjoy the stories more and perceive them to be of higher quality than when they are exposed directly to the news (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Similarly, Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2005) found users select more articles if news portals feature explicit recommendations from other users. The strength of these recommendations was a strong predictor of the time exposed to the article. These findings are consistent with the “bandwagon effect,” suggesting the way others react to a message is used as a heuristic cue by individuals to judge the same message (Axson, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987).

This aspect is relevant because, in contrast to broadcast and more traditional online media, “social feedback” mechanisms such as audience ratings (e.g., “likes” or “thumbs-up”), recommender systems (e.g., invitations to consume news based on similarities with other users), and counters indicating the number of visitors, readers or viewers, are embedded in the social media platforms and precede the information broadcasted by the media. Using the prominence -interpretation theory, Foggs (2003) notes two things happen when people assess credibility online: users first notice something that causes them to evaluate the content based on that element (Prominence), and then they make a judgment about the information (Interpretation). A regular Internet user, for instance, might interpret a slow link on a website or a URL redirecting him/her to a different address as a sign that the site has been neglected or was not created carefully in the first place. This, in turn, will affect subsequent judgment of the information presented on it (Foggs, 2003). Similarly, since social feedback mechanisms precede the information and occupy a prominent space in SNSs, the process of evaluation and interpretation of the content offered by the media, according to this framework, would be based on the social elements presented in the prominence stage. In fact, recent empirical studies suggest users place more emphasis on social validation than on traditional expert sources when assessing online information (Hargittai, et al., 2010). This

also is consistent with the relevance people assign to “others” as sources of information, which was discussed by Flanagin and Metzger (2008). Therefore, according to this line of research, users can be expected to afford greater validation to the information presented or rated by others than to direct exposures. This is expected to have a direct influence on how users process that information and become involved cognitively, leading individuals to trigger information processing more carefully (Eveland, 2004), which also will strengthen the effects that political information could have on them (Scheufele, 2002). As a result, users can have more opportunities to extract meaningful information from their media consumption (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005). Thus, the following is projected.

H2: Consumption of news through social media will be associated more strongly with online activism than the consumption of traditional broadcast and online media.

## The importance of political talk in online activism

Although the positive role of interpersonal discussion in news comprehension has been studied since the original two-step flow model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), only recently have scholars focused on the idea that citizens’ understanding of news depends on an interactive effect of mass and interpersonal communication (Gastil & Dillard, 1999; McLeod et al., 1999; Mutz, 2002; Shah et al., 2005). The assumption is that the impact of mass mediated information on a person’s understanding of politics should be utmost if the person is exposed to relevant information and talks about it with other people. This allows the person to think differently about the issue and to develop a better understanding of it (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004). Eveland and Thompson (2006) argue that individuals who talk about politics recount news media information as part of their conversations, which gives them additional opportunities to be exposed to information and to augment their understanding of it.

Additionally, research has found that interpersonal communication increases citizens’ ability to extract meaningful information from traditional news sources (Eveland, 2002; Scheufele, 2002). “Talking about pol-

itics helps individuals gain mobilizing information from media sources and thus increases willingness to participate. Put differently, interpersonal discussion about politics plays a significant role in translating mass-mediated messages into meaningful individual action” (Scheufele, 2001, p. 29). In fact, current understanding privileges theoretical models that consider communication factors as mediating and/or moderating variables (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004) with the ability to trigger a series of cognitive and expressive processes (Eveland, Shah, & Kwak, 2003) that activate participatory behaviors (Scheufele, 2000).

Since SNSs enable the co-creation of content by integrating peer-generated information into messages originally broadcasted by the media, and make simultaneous communication possible by juxtaposing both mass and interpersonal channels within the same medium, it can be argued that the social structure of SNSs enhances not only information acquisition, but also the capacity to discuss the information presented by the media (Gil de Zuniga, Jun, & Valenzuela, 2012). This in turn, as explained earlier, potentially may increase elaboration of and reflection on the same information, which helps individuals to make sense of what they were informed about while acquiring mobilizing information. Furthermore, the ways in which SNSs facilitate content distribution and discussion through contacts’ notifications also introduce new affordances that shape how people engage with others in these environments. These platforms allow users to communicate with a large group of people (just like the mass media), while preserving and even building the connectedness afforded by interpersonal communication methods (Teresi, 2012). If a user posts a comment about a news story, the message becomes public not only for the visitors/readers of the news media where the comment was posted, but also for the user’s network. This forms more “open” communities, since any fan, follower, or viewer of the media can participate in the discussion, but also can connect with the “bounded” network (since contacts are individually notified about comments), a system that generates a network informed audience.

Moreover, by relying on mass information-sharing to simplify social interactions, SNSs provide users with a perfect setting for facilitating

news consumption and discussion through comments generated by other users, thereby enabling the formation of the kind of networked public sphere Friedland, (2006) proposes. The framework suggested by Friedland et al. considers different spheres of society as being linked by flows of information that circulate between the political public sphere and the informal public sphere, and between the informal public sphere and civil society. They argue that these flows of communication and relationships in a networked public sphere are self-organized and move from the bottom up, converging in a new media reality that has become the social space where public opinion is formed. This idea is supported by scholars such as Castells (2007), Boyd (2011) Ito (2008) and Sheller (2004), who say the development of interactive, horizontal communication networks has sparked the emergence of a new environment that is significantly more open to challenge systems that have traditionally held a more powerful position. Under these participative and collaborative conditions, the potential for reflexivity in the system increases exponentially as active publics converge in groups restructured by networked technologies, in order to read, discuss, and argue about different issues. Thus, the following can be expected.

H3a Consumption of news through social media will lead users to discuss political news more than users who consume news from offline and traditional online media.

H3b Political talk through social media will have positive effects on online activism.

Additionally, since this paper aims to understand more about “online activists” who use the Internet and social media to inform themselves about major environmental issues and who participate in these new deliberative scenarios via Facebook pages, posting comments, watching videos and giving their opinions on those topics, we also pose the following research question to explore the role of informational and participatory uses of Web 2.0-based applications:

RQ: How frequently are Chileans using social media to inform themselves about major environmental issues and the participatory af-

fordances presented in Web 2.0-based applications to protest against these topics?

## Methods

### Sample and Procedure

To test our hypotheses and examine some of the “Off” and “Online” antecedents of participants who use Web 2.0-based applications for informational and participatory purposes, an online survey was conducted among Chilean adults in March and April 2013. This survey used an online panel provided by TrenDigital, a think tank based at the Catholic University of Chile. To overcome some of the limitations of using online surveys and to ensure a more accurate representation of the national online population, TrenDigital based this sample on the 2011 National Socioeconomic Characterization Survey (CASEN). Three variables were considered: gender (male: 48.7%; female 51.3%); age (18–34: 55%; 35–44: 20%; 45–64: 22%; 65+: 3%) and geography (Metropolitan Region: 47%, Fifth Region: 11%, Seventh Region: 10%, Other Regions South: 20%, Other Regions North: 12%). For more details about the selection process used to recruit the participants in the panel, please check the website [www.trendigital.cl](http://www.trendigital.cl) or contact the authors. The selected panel members received the survey’s URL through an e-mail invitation. This invitation provided respondents with a time estimate to complete the survey and information about a monetary incentive for their participation. The first invitation was sent on March 27, 2013 and two reminders were submitted in the following three weeks to improve the response rates. In all, 1,572 participants received the email, 850 responded to the questionnaire, yielding a 54.1% response rate, but 90 users did not complete most of it, so they were not considered in the analysis.

## Measurements

### Dependent Variables

*Online activism.* It was operationalized using six items designed to measure online protest against environmental projects, such as giving an opinion on environment issues through one of their social media accounts on at least one occasion during the past year, watching YouTube videos about one of

these projects, or joining a Facebook group created to protest the issue. The items, measured on the 5-point scale, were averaged to create a single measure ( $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ).

*Interpersonal Discussion on Politics.* Two separate items were prepared for face-to-face (FtF), and Web 2.0-based discussions. FtF political conversation was measured by means of a question that asked respondents, on the same 5-point scale as above, how often they discuss environmental and public affairs with others in person ( $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ). For Web 2.0-based discussions, we asked the participants how often they discuss politics and public affairs on social network sites, ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ).

*The Recycling and Pro-environmental Attitudes Scale.* Drawing on previous research (Gatersleben & Vlek, 1998; Kaiser, Wöfling & Fuhrer, 1999), the respondents were asked to indicate, using a 5-point scale from (1) "never" to (5) "at least twice," how often they engaged in various types of pro-environmental behavior and energy use during the past year, such as recycling plastic bags, purchasing biological and non-contaminant products, and collecting and recycling used paper ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78$ ).

## Control Variables

*Media Use.* The respondents were asked to indicate, on a 5-point scale, how frequently they use the media to obtain information about environmental issues and public affairs, ranging from (1) "never" to (5) "a few times per day." In the case of offline consumption (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ), an average use index was created for television, newspapers and radio ( $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). For traditional online media, we used the online edition of newspapers ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ) and, for Web 2.0 news media consumption, we asked how often they obtain information about environmental issues and public affairs from social network sites such as Facebook ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ).

*Time Spent on Social Media.* Users were asked to indicate, on the same 5-point scale (from "Don't use it at all" to "Almost all day"), how much time they spent the day before on SNSs such as Facebook or Twitter ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ).

Additionally, three demographic variables were used in the analyses: gender (52.9% female), age in years ( $M = 34.2$ ,  $SD = 1.9$ ), and education. Since education has been considered traditionally to be the main predictor of civic participation (Verba et al., 1995), the participants were asked about the highest level of formal education completed by their mother and father on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) "Less than high school" to (7) "Graduate degree," and indexed in an averaged item (interitem  $r = .512$ ,  $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Our study shows a large portion of Chileans who have access to Internet now have Facebook and Twitter accounts. These are the country's most used social networks. While 91% have a Facebook account and 51.6% have one on Twitter, 81.9% admitted using Facebook daily and 29% did the same on Twitter. One of the main aspects that emerged from the answers to our research question was how relevant it is for Chileans to inform themselves about national affairs through social media. In fact, when the respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they use different media during a normal week to obtain information on politics and public affairs, 71.7% indicated they use social media for that purpose at least twice per week. This percentage is even higher than for people who prefer to inform themselves through television (71.5%) and online newspapers (63.4%). As to how online Chileans are protesting against major environmental projects, the preferences for using social media are even higher: whereas only 12.2% indicated they have joined unauthorized street protests, 28.3% have joined an authorized protest, and 30.2% have participated in a forum on such issues. In fact, 52.9% of those surveyed claimed to have talked about environmental issues in their social media accounts at least once during the past year, 63.4% said they have seen a YouTube video about one such project, and a 48.4% indicated having joined a Facebook group created to protest on the subject.

To illustrate the interest the environmental issue has generated within the Chilean population, is important to mention that, compared to other areas of national interest such as the protests against the educational sys-

tem, Chileans are much more active on social media when it comes to protesting against major environmental projects. For instance, 34.4% of the respondents have joined a protest group on Facebook related to the “educational movement” (vs. 52.9% against major environmental projects); 32.5% claimed to have watched a YouTube video on the subject (vs. 63.4%), while 47.5% claimed to have posted their opinions on the educational issue through their social networks (vs. 48.4%). Interestingly, when they were consulted on how they learned about the major environmental issues, 98% said they received the information through social media. Similarly, when they were asked whether they have participated in “online” or “offline” activities related to these projects, once again, social media played a relevant role: 52.3% admitted to having posted information related to the project on social media and 30.3% said they had joined a group or page on Facebook to protest against the selected projects. Finally, Chileans also mentioned social media as being the channel used the most to receive information from NGOs and groups involved in environmental affairs. Compared to email or newsletters, this channel obtained most of the preferences.

## Multivariate Analysis

Since social media facilitate access to news information through contact notifications and horizontal communication, H1a hypothesized that social media users will exhibit more exposure to news content than with offline and traditional online media. To test this hypothesis, hierarchical multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions were run to account for potential rival explanations and to assess the exact relationship between time spent on social media and consumption of information. Table 1 compares the relationship between time spent on social media and consumption of information in the three channels studied. As was expected, the results show that, even after controlling for demographics, individuals who spend more time on social media also consume more news through this medium ( $\beta = .443, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, compared to other media, the standardized betas are significantly higher than consumption of information through traditional and online media, thus supporting H1. This difference also can be observed in terms of the higher explanatory power in the consumption of information.

Regarding the influence of news consumption on online activism, H1b hypothesized that information consumption on SNSs would have a positive direct effect on online activism. As was predicted, a positive relationship between news exposure through SNSs and online activism was detected in the regression model ( $\beta = .334, p < .001$ ). Hence, those who consume more information through social media are also more inclined to engage in online activism. H1b assumes that consumption of news through social media applications will be associated more strongly with online activism than traditional broadcast and online media, and the hypothesis was supported. Consumption of news through social media emerged as a stronger predictor of online activism.

As discussed in the literature review, the social structure of SNSs enhances not only the acquisition of information, but also the capacity to discuss the information presented by the media. To test whether consumption of news through social media leads users to discuss political news more than users who consume news from offline and traditional online media (H3a), two hierarchical regressions were run with political discussion as the dependent variable (via FtF and through social media), consumption of information in each channel as the independent variable, and demographics and education as control variables. Table 5 shows the relationship between consumption of information and political discussion in the three channels studied. As was hypothesized, the results show individuals who consume more news through social media also talk more about politics via this medium ( $\beta = .359, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, compared to other channels, the relationship between consumption of news and political discussion is significantly higher than in traditional and online media. The analysis also revealed how the affordances of SNSs can amplify and spread the effects of news information and political discussion in online activism. First, the regressions show the blocks related to news consumption have higher explanatory power in online and social media than in traditional media. The results are consistent with the idea that higher access to information consumption (e.g., news sharing through online media and contact notification in social media) and lower costs to initiate dialogue in online and social media (e.g., co-presence is not needed and conversations are asynchronous,

so networks are potentially “available” for access 24/7) facilitate news consumption and political discussion, enhancing their impact on online activism ( $\beta = .383, p < .001$ ), as H3b suggests.

## Discussion

Overall, this study yields three major findings. First, it was found that SNSs increase not only information acquisition, but also users’ capacity to discuss news presented by their contacts. Whereas time spent on SNSs was positively related to news consumption, users who consumed information through social media also discussed public affairs more than users of offline and traditional online media. Second, this study also allows researchers to understand, from a communicational perspective, how online activists in Chile use the Internet and social media to inform themselves about environmental projects and to participate in this new deliberative scenario by joining Facebook pages, posting comments, watching videos on YouTube and giving their opinions on those topics (online activism). Third, it shows that consumption of information in social media and discussion about public affairs via this channel prompts users to become much more involved in actions against environmental projects than is the case with less active social media users.

### **Social Media as Catalysts for News Consumption and Political Discussion**

A deeper understanding of how the online population is consuming information on environmental projects and discussing it through their networks on social media sites is justified on both theoretical and practical grounds, especially in a country like Chile where, following an online demonstration in 2010, the President announced he had overridden the environmental agency’s approval and personally asked the company to relocate the plant. First, it is important to discuss the fact that SNSs are increasing the acquisition of information as well as users’ capacity to discuss news presented by their contacts. As our study shows, time spent on SNSs is related positively to news consumption, and users who consume information through social media also discuss public affairs more than users of offline and traditional online media. This is important from a communication perspective,

since the growing number of services with primarily user-driven content (e.g., blogs, social network sites, micro-blogs and digital media sharing formats) is changing the manner of reception whereby individuals acquire and discuss information. Consequently, although social media users may not be interested in following news of this type, they may “encounter” information about environmental projects through comments made by their friends or simple invitations to read an article. And, this aspect is relevant; according to our study, the juxtaposition of institutional and peer information sources (the interposition of traditional media with content generated by peers) may, in fact, be changing the quality and quantity of information exchanged and, consequently, influencing personal behavior and attitudes toward these topics.

Similarly, given that SNSs are increasing not only information acquisition, but also users’ capacity to discuss news presented by their contacts, the precedence of peer comments on information that is broadcast by the media may generate added interest in the content of news, besides triggering more participatory behavior. This aspect is relevant because, as communication technologies become more participatory, the networked population begins to gain greater access to information and, consequently, more opportunities are formed to engage with others in this virtual public realm, which may develop more of an ability to undertake collective action. Consistent with previous studies that demonstrate how the Internet supplements traditional news consumption and provides additional outlets for participation, our study shows SNSs not only facilitate news consumption, but also enhance discussion among users about the information presented, all of which can lead to subsequent civic engagement. In drawing on research that considers information consumption as a primary source of civic engagement, the results of this study suggest news consumption through social media leads users to discuss political news more than users who consume news from offline and traditional online media. As mentioned earlier, this may be related to the lower barriers afforded by online media for initiating dialogue. Compared to other channels, social media’s accessibility for information consumption (e.g., news sharing with only one click or being notified by contacts), and the lower costs for dialogue initiation (e.g., co-presence is not needed and networks are poten-

tially “available” for access 24/7), may facilitate news consumption and political discussion.

In other words, lower barriers make it easier for users to discuss public affairs with others. Whereas users who are less interested in politics may not visit a friend to discuss public affairs, they might comment on the news shared by their contacts or posted on their SNSs walls. Relevant to the discussion is the fact that political activity on SNSs, such as writing a civically themed status update or joining an interest group on the site, requires little time or effort from the user; however, offline civic participation (e.g., volunteering for a campaign or finding others with whom to discuss public affairs) requires a more substantive commitment of resources. Consequently, only those who are extremely interested will participate (Vitak et al., 2011). This means interest in politics is a much better predictor of political discussion in FtF settings than via online or social media. Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Bimber 2001; Katz & Rice, 2002), this may be related to the lower barriers afforded by online media for initiating dialogue, which makes it easier for users to discuss public affairs with others. In this way, not only users who are highly interested in politics would participate in discussions in digital media; those who receive messages and/or see an opportunity to comment on others’ status will participate as well.

Furthermore, by relying on mass information-sharing mechanisms such as status updates, SNSs allow users to share their thoughts with their entire network and to learn what their network is thinking or has commented, just by logging onto their own accounts. This non-invasive form of communication reduces many of the social norm “costs” that regulate information transactions through other channels. As discussed above, unlike information-sharing that occurs through the mass media, discussants who engage in information-sharing FtF or through email expect the information being conveyed to them is somehow personally relevant. However, this is not the case in SNSs, where users may feel more freedom to comment on diverse topics, regardless of their network’s interests, given the low transactional costs and non-invasive forms of communication.

Moreover, our study shows consumption of information in social media and discussion about public affairs through this channel prompts users to become much more involved in actions protesting environmental projects than less active social media users. This finding also can be explained by the fact that SNSs are embedded in a structure that facilitates access to news information and promotes political discussion through the integration of peer-generated content and notifications, which can facilitate a common infrastructure for exchanging stories where individuals would identify with social issues and learn about opportunities for participation through other comments. In turn, these conversations about public affairs lead users to believe it is easier to mobilize collective efforts for solving community problems, thereby augmenting the likelihood of civic participation.

However, the model of civic participation enhanced by SNSs, as described above (in which users prefer a low time-effort commitment when engaging civically and mass information-sharing employs public discussion with users' networks), can present some limitations that need to be mentioned. First, this low time-effort commitment can be called slacktivism or clicktivism, terms used to describe actions that require little from the "activists," yet still provide the feeling that they have done something to help a given cause (e.g., Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009). The basic concern is that tweeting 140 characters in support of a breast cancer campaign, or "like"-ing a social cause on Facebook without having to get up from a chair, does not necessarily mean that users translate their civic engagement activities in social media into "offline" and "valued" forms of civic participation (Campbell, 2012). It is true these activities require less effort and can be done by "lazy" individuals; however, based on the positive relationship between SNS use and civic engagement, as well as the indirect and direct effects of political discussion and collective efficacy, it is possible to argue that SNS actions also can facilitate the development of civic skills through information consumption and political discussion. This may increase civic participation. Vitak et al. (2011) also stressed that one of the advantages of the more "lightweight" activities enabled via Facebook is the opportunity to "practice" civic skills with a minimal commitment of time and effort.

## Conclusion

The results of this study are also consistent with the idea that social media serve as catalysts for extensive conversations. Users participating in political discussions increase their levels of online activism when talking with their contacts. Moreover, the stronger association between political discussion and online activism in the Chilean population who use social network sites to talk about social issues supports the notion that use of social media facilitates civic discussion. Based on our results, it is possible to suggest that the habit of participation acquired through the course of online political expression may translate these expressive behaviors into other, tangible actions related to more participatory online activities.

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