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The Public Sphere and Network Democracy: Social movements and Political Change?

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Introduction

For many Internet advocates the social media provides an electronic agora to allow for alternative issues to be raised, framed and effectively debated. It is contended citizens may enjoy a real-time interactive access with one another to transmit ideas, by-pass authorities, challenge autocracies and affect greater forms of expression against state power. Thus, the social media allows for *many-to-many or point-to point forms of communication*. Most especially, online social networks such as *Facebook, LinkedIn* and *Twitter*, have facilitated opportunities for grassroots communication, deliberation and discussion.

This paper will analyse the democratic possibilities of technological innovations associated with Web 2.0 tools. First, it will address the first and second ‘waves’ of academic debates concerning the social media and the public sphere in the networked society. The initial optimism associated with a virtual public sphere was replaced by doubts about whether this model was appropriate for the development of democratic values. Consequently, Manuel Castells’ contention that the information communications networks have constructed a more personalised form of politics proved to be vital in the discussion of citizen participation. He suggests that grassroots networks have established social movements characterised by new types of solidarity, political resistance and the circumvention of national borders by facilitating ‘wider spaces’ of power in the global society.

Second, these concerns led to attention being placed upon the application of the networked power relations with reference to grassroots or social revolutionary movements. For instance, new communications environment were seen to be instrumental in forging the conditions for the ‘Arab Spring’ revolutions within Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, along with the mobilization of other forms of opposition in Libya and Syria. Similar claims were made for the online mobilization of Iranian demonstrators in the Green Revolution in 2009 and the Turkish protests within Istanbul’s Taksim square during the summer of 2013. These Middle

Eastern case examples will be discussed along with the calls for political and economic change in Southern Europe within financially constrained countries of Spain and Greece.

Third, a debate has emerged about whether the social media are reconfiguring power relations in terms of economic, political and social organization. For instance, are ICTs more effective in mobilizing voices for protest rather than formulating sustainable democratic institutions and political change? How effective have social media been in mobilizing voices for protest? Have both autocratic and democratically elected executives remained vigilant in protecting their interests? Thus, this paper will theorize on the key question concerning whether the social media can contribute to democracy, revolution and expansion of the public sphere, or whether they remain instruments of control and power.

The Democratic Values of the Internet: From the Dutiful Citizen to the Networked

Individual

In a first wave of enthusiasm for the political implications of the Internet, it was predicted that a digital democracy would emerge on the lines of an electronic agora or public sphere. This model followed Jürgen Habermas' critique concerning the rise of an organic public sphere which accompanied the democratic dissemination of information in the newspapers which emerged in the eighteenth century. He argued that the public sphere (the space between the state and the public in which mass communications operated) had demonstrated how private expressions could be transformed into public opinions. Through a range of 'rational' discourses within the public arena, the media expedited a process wherein private citizens debated ideas so that collective decision-making could occur and tyrannical political power might be challenged. Consequently, the hierarchical relations between political elites and the masses were broken down:

The economic independence provided by private property, the critical reflection fostered by letters and novels, the flowering of discussion in coffee houses and salons and, above all, the emergence of an independent, market-based press, created a new public engaged in critical political discussion. From this was forged by a reason based consensus which shaped the direction of the state (Curran and Gurevitch, 1992: 83).

With reference to Habermas's deliberative arguments, it was predicted that the growth of Internet interactivity and decentralisation of power relations would allow for a rational and informed debate. For instance, *Wired Magazine's* media correspondent Jon Katz compared the burgeoning 'net' to the eighteenth century pamphleteers of the American Revolution (Katz, 1995). It was argued that as the Internet was a global medium that digital citizens would not only be able to express their individual ideas but would create a diverse and cohesive virtual community to facilitate agency and reform (Wheeler, 1997: 224).

However, this wave of optimism was quickly replaced by more critical accounts which suggested that the Internet was conditioned by prevailing economic, social and political interests (Street, 1996). Further, questions emerged about the value of the virtual democracy as post-modernist perspectives about the 'simulacrum' or the implosion between subjective and objective meaning meant that the social media became seen as a means of narcissistic self-interest rather than collective activity. Other cultural critiques emerged about the value of the public sphere model as a means to engage the wider political community (see Iosifidis and Wheeler, forthcoming). It was contended that gender and race issues had not been addressed as the 'rational' communications within the multi-media favoured white, wealthy males to the exclusion of others (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 758). It was further argued that the democratising and empowering function of the Internet is being exaggerated

and that Public Service Media are capable of developing more inclusive social frameworks than online providers (Iosifidis, 2011).

In spite of these difficulties, a new wave of social and political theories emerged in the wake of the development of Web 2.0 platforms. This second generation of writing about Internet democracy has been distinguished by the displacement of the public sphere model with a networked citizen perspective. Instead of Habermasian concomitants from dutiful citizens, the ‘drivers’ of democratic innovation have been the networks of everyday citizens who are engaged in lifestyle politics (Bennett 2003; Dahlgren 2009; Papacharissi 2010). In tandem, it has been argued that alternative forms of cognitive behaviour are occurring as new generations engage with the software technologies of the social media. For instance, Margaret Wertheim has argued that cyberspace may construct an expansive sense of the ‘self’ which becomes ‘almost like a fluid, leaking out around us all the time and joining each of us into a vast ocean or web of relationships with other leaky selves’ (Wertheim, 1999).

Therefore, the private identities of autonomous citizens may be employed to advance a multitude of publicly realised political ideas and values (Loader and Mercea, 2011: 759). In his empirical study of Catalanian Internet users, Manuel Castells contended that personal autonomy is enhanced by social media usage in relation to societal rules and institutional power (Castells, 2007). He argues that these actors will engage in collective activity within the networked society to facilitate a reconfiguration of political solidarity through the dissemination of knowledge, the representation of alternative forms of social capital and the construction of grassroots engagement:

Enthusiastic networked individuals ... are transformed into a conscious, collective actor. Thus social change results from communicative action that involves connection between networks ... from a communicative environment through communications

networks. The technology and morphology of these communications networks shapes the process of mobilisation, and thus social change, both as a process and an outcome (Castells: 2012: 219-20).

The Networked Society and social revolutions

From this perspective, the network society is constituted from autonomous individuals who connect with one another in an ever opening space within politics. Consequently, non-traditional political actors have affected new forms of consciousness through blogs, tweets, Facebook activities and online petitions. Therefore, the virtual technology can facilitate a more 'virtuous' citizenship to reconnect the public with the democratic process to allow for 'civic commons' to emerge (Putnam, 2000; Chadwick, 2006: 25). In some respects, this transformation reflects the pluralism in governmental decision-making that Robert Dahl identified when he claimed that there would be a diffusion of centralised power relations (Dahl, 1961). However, for Castells power:

... Is no longer concentrated in institutions (the state), organizations (capitalist firms), or symbolic controllers (corporate media, churches). It is diffused in global networks of wealth, power, information and images, which circulate and transmute in a system of variable geometry and dematerialised geography (Castells, 2006: 359).

These concerns about the location of power have led to questions about how such forms of representation have segued into the contested principles of late modernity or post-democratic behaviour (Crouch, 2004). These ideas are comparable with but contest the notion of post-modernism, in that they suggest a self-referring modernism and fragmentation in which 'social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming

information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character' (Giddens, 1991: 38). In terms of post-democratic activity, late modernists contend such changes reflect a replacement of hierarchies with networks; the rise of discursive network governance, the expansion of the social media and a constantly reformed version of contemporary democracy (Marsh et.al, 2010: 326).

Clay Shirky has argued that within the networked society it becomes 'ridiculously easy' to break down the barriers which have previously closed off collective action (Shirky, 2009). Instead, the social media encourages the formation of self-directed open source or hacking groups to engage in their activities and to gather together. Therefore, the old hierarchies of repression, corporate interest and hermetically sealed ideologies are removed to allow for an alternative expression of grassroots political behaviour. Such a dispersal of power means that cyberspace will create a public space which ultimately becomes a political space wherein 'sovereign assemblies to meet and ... recover their rights of representation, which have been captured in political institutions predominantly tailored for the convenience of the dominant interests' (Castells, 2012: 11).

Accordingly, ICT networks will facilitate networked publics to construct their values, meaning and identity to affect new forms of solidarity. The Internet makes it easier to organize and agitate as people can participate in reality TV votes, or support a petition within the click of a mouse, or even force out undemocratic governments. This had led to the formation of networked social movements which have largely ignored the political elite, distrusted the established media, and have rejected any leadership, hierarchy or formal organisation, by using open forums for collective debate and social dialogue. This has been reflected in a 'division of labour' within activism that has been defined by the available social media platforms to build political consciousness:

If you look at the full suite of information tools that were employed to spread the revolutions of 2009-11, it goes like this: Facebook is used to form groups, covert and overt --- in order to establish those strong and flexible connections. Twitter is used for real-time organization and news dissemination, bypassing the cumbersome 'newsgathering' operations of the mainstream media. YouTube and the Twitter-linked photographic sites --- Yfrog, Flickr and Twitpic --- are used to provide instant evidence of the claims being made. Link-shorteners like bit.ly are used to disseminate key articles via Twitter (Mason, 2012: 75).

In turn, in a variation of the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan's adage that the 'medium is the message', Castells theorizes that the social media's power lies in the images of representation that are produced by people's consciousness (Castells, 2012). This understanding of the cognitive power of the social media accords with Lee Salter's (2003) arguments that the Internet is a novel technological asset for democratic communications 'because of its decentred, textual communications system, with content most often provided by users' (Fenton, 2011: 40). Informal New Social Movements (NSMs) have emerged from the de-alignment of partisan allegiances and networks of action. These NSMs may contradict the previous dominant logics, to affect a new social structure (a network society), a new economy (a global informational economy) and a new culture (a culture of 'real virtuality'):

The technological and inter-personal revolutions of the early twenty- first century [mean] ... it [is] now possible to conceive of living this 'emancipated' life as a fully connected 'species-being' on the terrain of capitalism itself --- indeed on the terrain of a highly marketized form of capitalism (Mason, 2012: 143).

Consequently, Web 2.0 has been *the* mechanism to inform new types of political resistance and has been the means through which revolts have occurred in western democracies, illiberal societies and against autocratic regimes. These changes have resulted from the deployment of digital communications within workplace and their growth throughout the publics' social lives. Due to the unprecedented exponential take up of these social media tools by online participants, these trends enhanced individual and collective behaviour to confirm the revolutionary potential of the new technologies, thereby expanding political consciousness and magnifying 'the crucial driver of all revolutions --- the perceived difference between what could be and what is' (Mason, 2012 : 85).

The Social Media and Political Movements: Opportunities and Repression in Iran and Turkey

As the networked population has gained a greater access to information, social movements have spread across the Arab world and have often been confronted with violent repression. For instance, the protests associated with the Iranian 'Green Revolution' against the disputed outcome of the 2009 General Election, in which President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad controversially won, were facilitated through Facebook and Twitter. According to Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany:

Many Iranians on Facebook changed their profile picture to a green square that included the text 'where is my vote', while many non-Iranians tweaked the icon to 'where is their vote.' Facebook turned green. It became a space for posting video ... articles ... photographs that had been sent by mobile or e-mail attachment from people in Iran. Facebook became an enormous distribution site of new or recycled materials (Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010: 173).

Simultaneously, Iranian activists used Twitter to provide real-time updates of the events. Therefore, an iconic video of a group of protesters marching down Tehran's Valiasr Street shouting, 'Mousavi, take back my vote!' went viral when attached to the micro-blogging site (Mason, 2012: 34). Another YouTube video showed what followed as the Iraqi riot police baton charged the unarmed crowd. This frightening material was attached to blogs, Facebook and Twitter sites to demonstrate the terror and chaos which accompanied the brutal subjugation of the political demonstrations. In addition, the protesters employed a range of online 'mashups' to achieve a variety of ranges of expression. These social media representations reflected a new form of political creativity which expressed an underlying solidarity to the cause. As a consequence, they demonstrated a politics of attraction as protestors could articulate their sympathy one another and engage in further activities to propagate their messages.

In response, the Iranian government censored the social media by filtering the websites and taking them down as a result of the protests. However, 'Freemove' an anti-censorship software developed by the Global Internet Freedom Consortium, was employed to a limited degree to offset the state controls. At an international level, western hackers kept the online channels open in spite of the Iranian regime's attempts to close them down. Further, as the Iranian authorities cracked down on traditional media outlets, international news agencies employed user-generated content and the 'momentum of the protests fed off this cycle of guerrilla newsgathering, media amplification, censorship and renewed protest' (Ibid.: 35). Ultimately, the Iranian protest would be lost, yet it provided:

... all the ingredients were present of the uprisings that would, eighteen months later, galvanise the Middle East and beyond: radicalized, secular-leaning youth: a repressed

workers' movement with considerable social power; uncontrollable social media; the restive urban poor (Ibid: 37).

Similar claims were made with regard to the online mobilization of the Turkish protesters who demonstrated in Istanbul's Taksim Square during the summer of 2013 (Mason, 2013). The civil unrest began on 28 May 2013 in response to the violent eviction of peaceful protesters who were engaging in a sit-in against the urban re-development of Taksim Gezi Park. Video footage of the riot police's excessive violence was posted online and this sparked a wider amount of unrest across Turkey. Subsequently, demonstrations and strikes were called in relation to a range of issues related to the freedom of the press, the rights of expression and assembly, and the Islamic Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's encroachment upon Turkey's secularist traditions.

On 1 June 2013, there was a restoration of the sit-in when the police withdrew from Taksim Square wherein the protesters lived in tents, organized a library and a medical centre, distributed food banks and established their own media centre. As Turkish broadcasters imposed a news blackout, the camp organizers used Twitter and Facebook to provide updates from the occupied Gezi Park, distributed photos on Flickr and Tumblr and uploaded videos onto YouTube. The Twitterhashtag, "direngezipark," was tweeted over 1.8 million times in three days. Invariably, the protesters used smart phone handsets to live-stream video images of the protests (Social Media and Participation Lab, 2013). In tandem, there were internationally re-tweeted messages of support for the demonstrations. For example, these included tweets from the Dutch footballer Wesley Sneijder, who was playing for the Istanbul football club Galatasaray (Hutchinson, 2013). However, the Gezi Park demonstration was cleared by riot police on the 15 June 2013. Consequently, videos and photos were uploaded

onto social media sites covering the brutal deployment of tear gas canisters and water cannons used to disperse the protesters.

Throughout the crisis Erdogan declared that the rioters were mere ‘looters’ who were using the social networks to undermine the legitimate government. He claimed that, ‘There is now a menace which is called Twitter ... The best examples of lies can be found there ... To me, the social media is the worst menace to society’ (Letsch, 2013). After the ‘Turkish Spring’ Erdogan’s antipathy to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube hardened even more. In 2014, he was angered by the leak of damaging information gleaned from wire-taps on Twitter in time for the local spring elections. This led to the Turkish authorities temporarily closing down the micro-blogging site on 20 March 2014. This closure was later declared to be unconstitutional. However, Erdogan’s government also tried to find ways to close YouTube and Facebook. A former pro-government columnist Nazli Ilıcak described the restrictions as being akin to ‘a civil coup’:

The disruption sparked a virtual uproar with many comparing Turkey to Iran and North Korea, where social media platforms are tightly controlled. There were also calls to take to the street to protest, although some users equally called for calm.

Turkish internet users were quick to come up with their own ways to circumvent the block. The hashtag #Twitterisblockedinturkey quickly moved among the top trending globally (Rawlinson, 2014).

However, as Paul Mason has commented these autocratic controls have come at cost to the authorities as they have realized that the Internet ‘is a network of networks, containing non-hierarchical pathways that simply do not allow you to switch part of it off ... (so) this is a signal moment [wherein] ... once-respected [statesmen have turned] into ... Canute-like [clowns]’ (Mason, 2014). Therefore, the dichotomy which exists between the imposition of

state controls to censor and to propagandize their values against the tide of alternative positions associated with grassroots activism has remained evident throughout the Middle East.

Social Media and Political Movements in the Mediterranean democracies of Spain and Greece

While the 2000s saw an explosion of protest movements in authoritarian Arabic states, post-2011 witnessed uprisings in democratic European nations including the Spanish ‘Indignados’ and the Greek ‘Aganaktismenoi’ (outraged). The demonstrations in Spain began on 15 May 2011 with an initial gathering in more than 50 Spanish cities and a few days later (25 May) activists started demonstrating in major cities in Greece organized by the ‘Direct Democracy Now!’ movement known as ‘Aganaktismenoi’ (the Indignant Citizens Movement). This unprecedented ‘protest movement domino’ had some similarities with the Middle East uprisings as Spanish and Greek demonstrators demanded a radical shift in politics. Indeed, they did not consider themselves to be represented by any of the traditional parties and opposed the policies adopted by their respective political elites. These case examples from Southern Europe were associated with calls for political and economic change in these financially constrained countries.

However, the similarities stop there. While the social media networks have been crucial in both the Arab world and the Southern European region in mobilizing people there are major differences between western democracies and the repressive Arabic regimes. These differences are deeply rooted in the social and political realities, ranging from the different levels of freedom of expression, to cultural differences, to the degree of censorship, to the core role of religion, to women’s rights, and the different levels of access to education. It is

not the intention of this paper to go through these differences in detail, but two basic observations can be made at this point.

First, the Spanish and Greek uprisings followed the seismic economic crisis of 2008 in the USA, which spread across the world and most especially to Southern Europe. It destabilized national economies and triggered political elites into introducing austerity measures. These refer to actions taken by governments to reduce their budget deficit using a combination of spending cuts and tax rises. Second, these movements were promoted and maintained through the use of social media exactly in the same way as the Arab uprisings. In today's highly mediatized environment it was primarily social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, rather than the traditional pro-government media which mobilized people in times of economic crisis and kept them connected.

Therefore, social media driven movements in both Spain and Greece stood against anti-austerity measures adopted by the respective governments. At the time, Spain had the highest unemployment rate in Europe, reaching a Eurozone record of 21.3 per cent with the youth unemployment rate standing at 43.5 per cent, the highest in the European Union (in February 2015 Greek youth unemployment at a rate of 50.1 per cent was the highest in the Eurozone area - see <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/greece/indicators>, accessed 13 May 2015). The anti-austerity movement in Greece was provoked by then government plans to cut public spending and raise taxes in exchange for a 110 billion Euro bail-out aimed at solving the Greek government debt crisis.

Turning to Habermas's notion of the public sphere, it could be argued that the social media have enabled people to take speedy and costless individual action. As common people experienced a decline in their incomes and the traditional media typically labelled austerity policies as 'unavoidable', they saw that the social media offered them with an opportunity to

raise their voices upon the streets. These ICT networks created a new sphere of ‘public authority’ wherein public opinion was simultaneously shaped both within national borders but also beyond them, providing access to a trans-national sphere of discourse made possible due to the global nature of the Internet. In times of deep economic crisis, Web 2.0 networks offered a unique opportunity to local citizens to shape their political views in the cyber space and translate them into action. Consequently, the German philosopher Habermas took an active role in the debate about the Spanish and the Greek economic crisis (and ultimately the European crisis). He not only condemned the parties for failing to provide a realistic, development-oriented and citizen-friendly strategy to overcome the crisis but also blamed the EU for the problematic adaptation of the single currency and the pursuance of tough fiscal policies (see <http://www.voxeurop.eu/en/content/article/1242541-juergen-habermas-last-european>).

Could these arguments lie under the protests in Spain and Greece then? Is this systemic crisis lying under the protestors’ agenda? And how do the social media form the extended public sphere? In a 2006 article Habermas gave us a hint of his ideas on the matter:

The internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines (Habermas, 2006).

The intellectual argument rising here originates from Marxism and Critical Theory (when referring to critical studies of digital media and the information society, the majority of scholars actually mean Marxist studies of the new media). It relates to the notion of mediatization (this paradigm contends that the media shapes and frames the processes and discourse of political communication as well as the society in which that communication takes place) and to the arguments on how the ‘media ways’ have colonized all aspects of our everyday lives, including politics and activism. Taking a critical political economy approach on the way social media is produced and distributed (Fuchs, 2009) the next section provides a critique of the social media and its democratic potential by highlighting the shortcomings that the information networks present for uprisings and protest movements.

A Critique of the Social Media --- individualism; unreliability, polarization and the reconfiguration of political power?

Online social networking sites have been often perceived as revolutionary new media tools, because they allow greater citizen participation in the dissemination of information and creation of content. The networked population is gaining greater access to information, enhanced opportunities to engage in public speech, and an ability to undertake collective action. However, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued that such forms of ‘liquid modernism’ in which individualist practices of social behaviour create new opportunities for the self-realization of participation may also exacerbate uncertainties in the human condition. Most notably, the new patterns of social activity have paradoxically facilitated an increasing fluidity in people’s behaviour while producing existential fears over being imprisoned by such freedoms (Bauman, 2000: 8).

Principally, the Marxist Hypermedia scholars Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron have argued that the ‘Californian Ideology’ which had emerged from the technophiles within

Silicon Valley encompassed a range of neo-liberal economic principles forged by individualistic and deregulated forms of free-market enterprise (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996). In effect, such techno-populist libertarianism constructed a labour aristocracy or ‘virtual class’ who benefitted from an inequitable distribution of resources as there was a commodification of individual thought through a supply-side market transaction between entertainment providers and users (Wheeler, 1998; 228-9). According to Barbrook and Cameron this meant:

Despite its radical rhetoric, the Californian Ideology is ultimately pessimistic about fundamental social change. ... The social liberalism of New Left and the economic liberalism of New Right have converged into an ambiguous dream of a hi-tech ... version of the plantation economy of the Old [American] South. Reflecting its deep ambiguity, the Californian Ideology’s technological determinism is not simply optimistic and emancipatory. It is simultaneously a deeply pessimistic and repressive vision of the future (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996: 14).

These concerns underpin John Keane’s analysis of what he describes as the ‘Decadent Media.’ Public expression has been restricted into individual discourses and the concentration of power within the new media has undermined the substance of democratic behaviour. Therefore, Keane identifies the disparities which exist between the normative expectations associated with ‘media abundance’ such openness, plurality, inclusion and equality with a more tarnished reality in which the social media promote the intolerance of opinions, restrict the scrutiny of power and propagate an acceptance of the way things are heading. In this respect, Keane contends that elite business and state power has been

enhanced by data collection, censorship, spin and new mechanisms of surveillance (Keane, 2013):

Message-saturated societies can and do have effects that are harmful for democracy. Some of them are easily spotted. In some quarters, most obviously, media saturation triggers citizens' inattention to events. While they are expected as good citizens to keep their eyes on public affairs, to take an interest in the world beyond their immediate household and neighbourhood, more than a few find it ever harder to pay attention to the media's vast outpourings. Profusion breeds confusion (Keane, 2010).

In trying to comprehend the sheer mass of information, users are further confronted by the fact that much of the Internet's content is unreliable. As a widespread source of information the Internet should provide reliable, authentic and up-to-date information, but user generated content and blogs, in particular, are often defined as unreliable sources, containing personal and one-sided opinions. It is fair to say that common sense (house rules) and common decency should be the rule, or acceptable practice, when posting materials on the Internet, but as this is largely a self-regulated area, reaction comes only when someone complains. There is clearly a need for a better balance enforcing appropriate online behaviour, the assignment of liability, and protecting freedom of speech. Frankly providing an informed (and safe) online experience is important both for users and businesses.

Dahlberg (2007) has found that the online debate is polarized and there is generally a lack of listening to others. He pointed out that the Internet and social media fail to adequately consider the asymmetries of power through which deliberation and consensus are achieved, the inter-subjective basis of meaning, the centrality of respect for difference in democracy, and the democratic role of 'like-minded' deliberative groups. What is often absent in online

deliberations is a consensus-based, justified and rational decision, let alone that not everyone affected by that decision is included. The ‘echo-chamber’ (Sunstein, 2007) effects of the social media mean that agreements becomes impossible, issues become ‘flamed’ and decision-making become subjected to the greater polarization of opinion:

A political process in which like-minded people talk primarily to one another poses a great danger for the future of a democracy. This kind of process can lead to unwarranted extremism. When various groups move in opposite directions to extreme positions, confusion, confrontation, accusation, and sometimes even violence may be the ultimate result (Sunstein, 2001: 7).

Therefore, it has been asked whether the Internet rather than promoting change has reinforced the social institutions of economic, political and social power. Instead of the networked society constructing opportunities for change and reform, Couldry has argued that the existing power relations have remained firmly in place. First, he questions whether the power held within the networks can transform or affect other forms of power which exist outside of the network? Secondly, that the network analysis fails to address the matters of context and resources which are necessary for any sustainable development of political agency. Third, and most fundamentally, that economic, military and legal authority cannot be reduced to network operations. Instead, state and corporate interest retain their central functions in society and combine to undermine individual autonomy and agency (Couldry, 2012: 116-8).

In this context, Fenton contends that the networked forms of communications cannot really challenge the multi-media concentrations of capital which define the political economy of the Internet (Fenton, 2012). She argues that political solidarity is shaped by the material

experience of labour relations, struggles and conflicts rooted in the exploitation of labour by the pursuit of capital. Thus, solidarity is a modernist concept based on the principles of a political economic order and workers remain exploited by the hegemonic forces of capital. Therefore, for grassroots solidarity to be effective it is necessary to reorganize global capitalist relations so that they are not monolithic forces of impenetrable domination (Fenton, 2011: 53). This means that the commercial power of the Internet needs to be understood as a significant barrier towards the proletariat's political expression and that for collective identities to emerge that it must be realized:

While it is true that social media provide a pleasurable means of self-expression and social connection, enable people to answer back to the citadels of media power and in certain situations ... may support the creation of radical counter-public ... Social media are more often about individual than collective emancipation, about presenting self (frequently in consumerist ... terms) rather than changing society, about entertainment and leisure rather than political communication ... and about social agendas shaped by elites and corporate power rather than a radical alternative (Curran, Freedman and Fenton, 2012: 180).

Conclusion

This paper has considered the implications concerning the democratic potential of the social media in forming new types of power relations, determining alternative social movements and affecting changes in political consciousness. Web 2.0 tools have been seen to advance a greater plurality of expression and to allow for the construction of horizontal networks of communication. According to Castells, these information networks represent the diffusion of centralised power and the democratisation of political expression (Castells, 2012). In this

respect, the process is as important as the outcome as the social media allow for a multi-dimensional range of opinions and values to be accumulated to shape political behaviour and outcomes.

Within this context, it is claimed that the social media facilitate the potential power of revolutionary groups and forces. Therefore, in Western societies and Global Southern states, there have been a range of examples in which populist uprisings and alternative voices have been raised. Web 2.0 tools have allowed social movements to respond to public grievances and for the mobilisation of oppositional forces. As there was a major take-up of broadband Internet and mobile telephony services within Iran and Turkey, there were greater degrees of political engagement in these states. Yet the opportunities for the free forms of online expression have been qualified by retrogressive laws and censorship. In response to grassroots protest movements both the Iranian and Turkish authorities' utilized repressive measures to stem the flow of Internet traffic to temporally close down the social networks. Such concerns have led to a major debate about whether the social media could overcome the perceived democratic deficits within these societies.

The Spanish (*Indignatos*) and Greek (*Aganaktismenoi*) movements have demonstrated how the social media could be utilized to mobilize the public to take to the streets against the imposition of tough austerity measures. The Spanish case is important as Spain's economy is the fourth largest in the Eurozone area (based on nominal GDP statistics) and its poor performance, alongside social upheavals due to high unemployment, not only reflects badly on the country but also the whole region. The Greek case is unique as Greece appears to have been the 'weakest link' of a badly manufactured Eurozone project, ready to break and produce financial chaos in the global markets. This has produced a deep crisis in Europe with unpredictable economic and indeed social and political effects. These cases help us to

understand how the use of social media revolutionised and expanded the public sphere to contribute to people's political awakening in Southern Europe. However, it remains to be seen whether these movements will have lasting effects in terms of political change and a shift in economic direction.

In particular, the questions of power and responsibility which have permeated the traditional media remain pertinent with regard to the democratic potentials (or not) of the social media. Questions abound concerning individualistic forms of participation; the trivialisation of information, the inability to distinguish between 'real' and 'virtual' communications and the saturation of information which has been endemic in an over-abundant social media. Effectively, can people make sense of the ranges of information they receive? Further, have the echo-chamber effects of a pluralistic, but highly individualist discourse, led to a stratified and polarized rather than collective form of political activity?

More instrumentalist critiques have questioned the economic, political and social constraints that continue to abound within cyberspace and suggest that communications networks reinforce rather than challenge the institutions of capitalism. In particular, Fenton argues that technological utopianism masks the fact that 'the Internet does not transcend global capitalism but is deeply involved with it by virtue of the ... discourses of capitalism ... in which people who use it are drenched in' (Fenton, 2012: 124). Therefore, the democratic potential of the social media remains contested. Consequently, it remains to be seen whether the social network sites will prove to be beneficial or detrimental for the extension of citizens' democratic rights.

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