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Networking democracy? Social media innovations in participatory politics

Brian D. Loader and Dan Mercea

(University of York)

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Abstract

Early conceptions of digital democracy as a virtual public sphere or civic commons have been replaced by a new technological optimism for democratic renewal based upon the open and collaborative networking characteristics of social media. This article provides an introduction to a special issue of the international journal *Information, Communication & Society* which attempts to present a grounded analysis on these claims drawing upon evidence-based research and analysis. A more cautious approach is suggested for the potential of social media to facilitate more participative democracy whilst acknowledging its disruptive value for challenging traditional interests and modes of communicative power.

Keywords: digital democracy, electronic democracy, social media, public sphere.

Introduction

The first wave of enthusiasm for internet based visions of digital democracy were largely predicated upon the desire to produce virtual public spheres (Loader, 1997; Tsagarousianou 1998; Blumbler and Gurevitch, 2001). Democratic governance, it was contended, could be significantly improved through the open and equal deliberation between citizens, representatives and policy makers, afforded by the new information and communications technologies. For cyberlibertarians this could even be achieved without the need for

governments (Barlow, 1996). For left of centre progressives it could enable stronger participatory democracy through the emergence of online Agoras and Habermasian forums (Habermas 1962; Hague and Loader 1999). The history of science and technology provide many instances of the fanfare of transformative rhetoric which accompanies the emergence of 'new' innovations and which are then often followed by disappointment and more measured appraisal (Bijker et al., 1987). So perhaps it should have been little surprise that the utopian perspectives of the first generation of digital democracy were quickly replaced by findings that documented the myopia of such visions (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000). Instead of transforming representative democracy the new media, as Hill and Hughes suggested, was more likely to be shaped by the existing entrenched social and economic interests of contemporary societies (1998:182). By the turn of the millennium a more accurate picture of the influence of the internet upon democratic governance was emerging as the technologies were understood as a part of the mundane activities of 'everyday life' (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Here was to be found the factionalism, prejudice and abuse which have all too often mired the aspirations of deliberative decision- making (Doctor and Dutton, 1998). But perhaps more significantly the very idea of a virtual Habermasian public sphere was subjected to extensive critiques from cultural studies scholars (McKee, 2005) and feminist theorists (van Zoonen, 2005). They have revealed how such models of deliberative democracy frequently privilege a particular style of 'rational' communication that largely favours white, wealthy males to the exclusion of other identities (Pateman, 1989; Fraser, 1990).

Despite these setbacks to digital democracy, a fresh wave of technological optimism has more recently accompanied the advent of social media platforms such as *Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Wikies* and the *blogosphere*. The distinctiveness of this second generation of internet democracy is the displacement of the public sphere model with that of

a networked citizen-centred perspective providing opportunities to connect the private sphere of autonomous political identity to a multitude of chosen political spaces (Papacharissi, 2010). It thus represents a significant departure from the earlier restricted and constrained formulations of rational deliberation with its concomitant requirement for dutiful citizens. In its place is a focus upon the role of the citizen-user as the driver of democratic innovation through the self-actualised networking of citizens engaged in lifestyle and identity politics (Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010).

What then are we to make of these latest claims for digital democracy arising from the second generation of social media applications? Are they best interpreted as a further commercial incarnation of internet mythology making (Mosco, 2005) destined to become ameliorated through ubiquitous everyday incorporation? Or do they offer new opportunities for challenging dominant discourses and privileged positions of power? Is there evidence for the emergence of a more personalised politics being played out through social networks? This special issue of *Information, Communication & Society* is intended to provide an opportunity for a more grounded appraisal of the potential of social media for second wave digital democracy.[i] The articles in this issue have all been selected for their respective critical insights and articulations with contemporary debates about citizenship and democratic culture(s). Our objective in this introductory article is to provide a wider context to these analyses by outlining some of the existing claims made for the democratic potential of social media and laying out a number of issues and questions informing our own thinking on the subject. In sum, it is our contention that with the more widespread use of social media and internet technologies and their absorption into the mundane practices of lived experience their potential to shape social relations of power becomes all the greater. Yet such influence is likely to be in ways that are indeterminate and contingent upon a multitude of clashes between social agents, groups and institutions who have competing conceptions of

networking democracy. Such contests are becoming very familiar such as, for example, the use of social media platforms for disclosing government secrets through *Wikileaks* (Leigh and Harding, 2011), organising student protests in the UK, mobilizing opposition in Egypt, orchestrating election campaigns, challenging privacy laws through Twitter, lampooning politicians on YouTube, and other manifestations. Such disruptive activity can play an important role in democratic politics but what is less clear is how social media is shaped by and in turn influences the social relations of power.

Social Media Democracy

Much of the hyperbolic rhetoric heralding the catalytic prophesies of social media arise from its marketing origins (O'Reilly, 2005). Yet this should not obscure the enthusiastic assertions made by a number of prominent commentators (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Leadbeater, 2008) that this latest generation of communications technologies has inherent democratic capacities. In contrast to traditional mass media, these writers share a common view that networked media has the potential to re-configure communicative power relations. By facilitating social networking and 'user-centred innovation'(von Hippel, 2005) citizens are said to be able to challenge the monopoly control of media production and dissemination by state and commercial institutions. Freed from the necessities of professional media and journalist skills or the centralised control and distribution of industrial mass media organisations, social media is instead seen to be technologically, financially and (generally) legally accessible to most citizens living in advanced societies. Equipped with social media, the citizen no longer has to be a passive consumer of political party propaganda, government spin or mass media news, but is instead actually enabled to challenge discources, share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions.

The openness of social media platforms facilitates the potential of what Charles Leadbeater (2008) calls the 'mass-collaboration' of individuals and groups who become the source of new innovations and ideas in democratic practices. This view has an affinity with the work of scholars in the field of science and technology studies (STS) who have long argued for recognising the central role played by 'social groups' in shaping the design and diffusion of new technologies (Winner, 1986). The fluid and contingent nature of technological innovation has been further exposed through the insights of feminist, actor network and domestication approaches which have all in their respective ways emphasised the importance of the 'user' in the co-construction of technologies (Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2005). Through such perspectives, the flexible and contested development and experimentation with social media technologies can itself be seen as a democratic opportunity. But they also crucially dispel the deterministic idea that social media are themselves inherently democratic and that politics is dead. The acquisition of an *iPhone* or access to a social networking site does not determine the engagement of citizens. As the first generation of digital democracy experiments demonstrated, the use of new media for deliberation was strongly influenced by a complex range of socio-cultural factors. In all likelihood, virtual public spheres and civic commons (Coleman and Blumler, 2009) met with limited success not because of the deficiencies of the technologies but rather because the Habermassian model was incongruent with the contemporary political and social culture of many societies. In evaluating the democratic influence of social media then, a more fruitful approach may be to adopt the co-construction model with its more open, interpretive, and contingent explanatory power; one that also recognises the influence of social diversity, inequality, and cultural difference as important sources of power influencing democratic innovation.

User-generated Democracy?

A number of early indications suggest that we should be cautious in proclaiming the democratic potential of social media for significantly challenging the existing commercial and political dominance of many social groups. In the first place, if we consider social networks, in contrast to an even distribution of links representing a wide diversity of interests, we find instead that individual preferences reveal an unequal spread of social ties with a few giant nodes such as *Google, Yahoo, Facebook, YouTube* attracting the majority of users (Barabasi, 2011). Such concentrations of hyperlinks to a few dominating spaces could be seen to grant a disproportionate authoritative influence over information sources for users. The potential for competition between political discourses may be restricted, for example, by such mechanisms as search engine ranking algorithms which privilege access to information (Halavias, 2009). Richard Rogers in his work with the *Issue Crawler* has suggested that the strength of social ties and the density of their clusters can provide a visualisation of information politics as relational sources of power (2004). Whilst such analyses do not preclude the influence of citizen-users, we need more detailed and nuanced examinations of the actual use of social media before we can assess its democratic affordances.

What evidence we do have about social media platforms suggests that the most active political users are social movement activists, politicians, party workers and those who are already fully committed to political causes. Adopting the commercial model of social media as a means to target consumers, these users are attracted by its perceived cost-effective scalability to spread their ideas and attract recruits. Even the potential of citizen journalism appears to be restricted by the domination of a limited number of political bloggers (Rettberg, 2008). Instead of facilitating an increasing host of active citizen-users, social media perhaps

more typically facilitates online shopping, gossip and file sharing between friends already known to each other.

Whilst clearly a cause for concern for those optimists wishing that more of their fellow citizens would join them in political discussions online, should we conclude that the everyday use of social media has limited potential for democratic innovation? In part the answer to the question depends upon what we regard as democratic activity. If we move beyond the traditional engagement with mainstream politics, such as voting, party membership, petitioning representatives and the like, and adopt a more fluid conception of democratic citizenship, a different focus and set of questions emerges. One that is more attuned to the potential changing perceptions of citizens less inclined to be dutiful and open instead to a more personalised and self-actualising notion of citizenship. An approach which does not valorise the more rigid one-dimensional political identities of previous times but instead recognises the multiplicity of identity positions which citizens are required to grapple with in contemporary societies; where the spheres for democratic engagement reach into the private spaces to enable the personal to become political (Squires, 1998). In this framework it may be possible to interpret the democratic potential of social media in a new light.

Papacharissi (2010), for example, points to how citizen-users can participate in campaigns whilst simultaneously enjoying television and/or chatting with family in the privacy of their own home. Moreover, the very malleability of social media offers the prospect of innovative modes of political communication that may go beyond the constrictions of rational deliberative exchanges. It might facilitate Iris Young's exhortation that testimony, story telling, greetings and rhetoric can all be employed as discursive forms of democratic engagement capable of enabling a more inclusive democracy (2000). Thus, we could look for the kinds of political self-expression more widely experienced and performed through a variety of text, visual, audio and graphic communication forms. The playful

repertoires of innovative *YouTube* videos, mobile texting language, protest music, and the celebration of trivia may all be regarded as aspects of the political.

Those sceptical of such broad definitions of politics are likely to reject the democratic potential of social media and instead point to its capacity to undermine serious rational deliberation. Instead, they will cite its use for negative campaigning and encouraging populist rhetoric and even extremism; a further means to sensationalise the public sphere and foster celebrity politics. Moreover, the very 'networked individualism' (Wellman et al., 2003) which characterises social media, can be regarded as further evidence of the social fragmentation which is seen as corroding collective action and social responsibility (Putnam, 2000).

To-date perhaps the most obvious impact of social media upon democratic politics has been its disruptive capacity for traditional political practices and institutions. Divisions have become blurred, for example, between mainstream news media increasingly reliant upon political blogs and citizens-user content. Whilst the potential power of collaborative sharing has been demonstrated by the *Wikileaks* disclosure of US government foreign policy statements online. Different in style from earlier forms of civic participation, such disruption is effected by enabling citizens to critically monitor the actions of governments and corporate interests. It could potentially enable political lifestyle choices to be informed through shared recommendations from friends, networked discussions and tweets, and direct interaction with conventional and unconventional political organisations. What the more lasting effects of these disruptions might be remains to be seen and we have yet to know what the response will be from governments, corporations or judiciaries to such user-generated challenges.

Grounding the analysis

The foregoing debates and issues provide the context to the contributions that follow. They represent an attempt to investigate in detail how these competing claims may be playing out in concrete situations. In the opening article, Bennett and Segeberg propose that in a political environment increasingly marked by the individualisation of choice, (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000), a dissipation of established solidarities and an entrepreneurial mode of engagement (Flanagin et al., 2006), collective action is growing new roots. At the heart of such renewal lie the social media of personalized, network-based communication (Hogan & Quan-Hasse, 2010). Bennett and Segeberg's comparative analysis examined two contrasting protest networks that took shape in the run up to the 2009 G20 meeting in London. 'Put People First' was both ideologically and organisationally the more loosely articulated of the networks. By contrast, the 'G20 Meltdown' coalition united an ideologically consistent radical front of anti-capitalist and environmental organisations. Their deployment of social media stood in stark contrast. 'Put People First' placed an emphasis on the personalisation of both participation and collective goals. Its mobilisation strategy foregrounded the empowerment of prospective participants by harnessing the collaborative capacity of social media. 'Put People First' was able to both maintain its political focus and attain a level of cohesion that rivalled that of the more homogenous activist coalition. The latter, however, was not equally competent in its use of social media, relying on them principally for the distribution of calls for action. Most importantly, Bennett and Segeberg's make a persuasive case that social media may contribute to the reconciliation of the competing pressures of achieving both personalisation and solidarity in collective action.

The inquiry into the G20 protests raised other crucial questions which cross-over into deliberations of the relationship between social movements and media organisations as well as the power held by the media to re-present a movements' public agenda. The allowances 'Put People First' made for personalised communication did not seem to dilute its core message or hinder the dissemination of its appeals in the mass media. Their example may lend empirical support to the claim made in this volume by Donatella della Porta that social movements are beginning to stand on a more equal footing with media organisations in their capacity to depict their actions in their own desired light. This may be a recurring assertion made in relation to social movements' use of the internet (Atton, 2004; Castells, 2007). However, della Porta locates its wider significance within the context of the power differential in the relations between social movements and more resourceful social actors such as the media or the state. Her theoretical exposition is an invitation to place social movements at the heart of the power dynamic which keeps democracy in an organic state of perpetual transformation. In this way, one is reminded that democratic institutions act not only as structural conditions for social movements. On the contrary, social movements have the agency to place democratic institutions at the centre of a normative debate which they can engender through networked communication. By so doing, social movements come to actively shape the structural conditions in which they operate, previously defined exclusively by the more powerful social actors.

Yet, the media remain the main stage where public discourse is formed and, as Castells (2007: 241) contends, 'what does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind'. In her article, Joanna Redden, brings empirical evidence to bear on this assertion in her consideration of media representations of poverty in Canada and the U.K. People's shared depictions of poverty are drawn from the media (Park, Phillips & Robinson, 2007). The media in the two countries, Redden argues, are systematically constructing

representations of poverty which legitimate market-type evaluations of public policy interventions. Highlighting individual responsibility for material disadvantage and reifying statistical calculations which evidence public spending on poverty seems to leave little space for a reasoned assessment of its structural causes. Alternative discourses may, nonetheless, be bubbling up online where poverty activists are organizing their contestation of the mainstream coverage of poverty. However, Redden reminds us that established media outlets have a much more prominent presence also online. Activists are, therefore, faced with the uphill struggle to reset the debate and bring new democratic scrutiny over institutional responses to poverty. Ultimately, the networked communication that comprises tools for both interaction and dissemination may gradually enable resource-poor political actors not only to gain a foothold in the public realm but also perhaps to have a larger imprint on democratic politics.

As noted above, social media may be at the forefront of the shift towards a more participatory political culture. That culture may be manifesting itself in the form of increasingly visible political vernaculars that contest expert valuations of democratic processes. Anstead, O'Loughlin and Ampofo examined the conversation that erupted on *Twitter* in the wake of the prime-ministerial debates in the UK 2010 general election. They followed the polemic that ensued on *Twitter* around the statistics for who won one of the three debates. Their analysis revealed that the purposeful deployment of social media to enhance the consumption of broadcast content can become hijacked by a 'viewertariat'. The 'viewertariat', according to these authors, is a growing constituency of 'citizen users' who actively engage in an often critical conversation about political content and its expert interpretation furnished to them by the media. Such engagement can produce the unintended consequence of generating competing expertise to that aired by media and political elites.

If such developments perhaps allude to another instance of political empowerment galvanized by social media, *Twitter* hashtags may bolster the position of traditional media outlets online. In her article, Tamara Small provides an insight into how hashtags -keywords attached to a posting designed to assign it to a running thread and expedite its retrieval- may link up the media to audiences previously outside their reach. #cdnpoli is the most prominent and perennial Canadian political hashtag which Small found to be a site of diverse interaction among elected representatives, journalists, individual bloggers and interest groups. Particularly notable were indications that the information flow generated through the #cdnpoli hashtag was at the forefront of a fast-paced transformation of political newsmaking. Thus, in spite of not advancing the democratic virtues of political deliberation (Dahlgren, 2003), this political hashtag served the function of aggregating, distilling and directing political information. Last but not least, Small contends that contributions to the hashtag's flow of information may be regarded as another invigorating form of participation in democratic politics.

A persistent question in the research on political participation is whether it may be extended beyond a narrow constituency of politically active and informed citizens (Bimber, 2003; Iyengar & McGrady, 2007). Henrik Serup Christensen and Åsa Bengtsson visit this on-going discussion which for some time now has had the internet at its heart (Dahlgren, 2009). Considering the case of Finland, which we are reminded stands out as a trailblazer of internet penetration and computer literacy, Christensen and Bengtsson's rigorous empirical study raises a number of stimulating observations. On the one hand, his article supplies further confirmation that it is chiefly politically active and cognizant citizens that are utilizing the internet as a vehicle for political participation. On the other hand, and more surprisingly, the internet acts as an arena for political participation for people who are otherwise unengaged in politics. Thus, the internet appears to contribute to a rise in political participation. At the

same time, online political engagement may foster the deepening of people's overall political competence. Finally, the article also asserts that social groups that are politically marginalized such as young people are more likely to become politically active through the Internet. Given the mounting evidence (Loader 2007; Baron 2008; Bae Brandtzaeg & Heim 2009; Livingstone, Olaffson, Staksrud 2011) that social media are especially popular among young people, we may expect that a significant part of their political actions will unfold on social media platforms.

In her article that looked at youth organisations from the UK, Janelle Ward makes the case for a comparative analysis of the political engagement they facilitate through websites or social media. Ward shows that in spite of aspirations to increase interactivity -particularly the co-productive type geared to co-opting young users in content creation- the vast majority of the twenty-one organisations in her sample did not attain that goal. Moreover, only one third of those organisations had established a presence on social media platforms. The social media users among the youth organisations were primarily employing them for top-down dissemination. Thus, organisational practices seemed slow to adapt in the face of changes in their online communication environment. Ultimately, Ward suggests that youth organisations may chiefly seek to inculcate a ready-made notion of citizenship through their online communication. In that logic, social media would tend to be used strategically to serve that or other predetermined purposes.

Returning to Serup Christensen's piece, they posit that politically marginalised groups may find a renewed impetus to become more active through digital media. He further points out that Finnish women also seemed to be heartily embracing the opportunity for digital participation. Examining a different national context, Cohen and Raymond focus on a social group whose concerns they describe as often downplayed within the mainstream of the US medical culture, pregnant women. The authors seek to map out digital networks of empathy

and social learning for pregnant women that are articulated through online discussion fora. They review evidence which suggests that American women tend to be socialised into a deferential attitude towards medical professionals which precludes them from voicing some of their anxieties about physical and mental experiences they associate with their pregnancy. Online forums may afford pregnant women the latitude to express the entire gamut of questions and emotions they have about their condition and in that way empower them to challenge entrenched medical practices. Cohen and Raymond view online forums as one type of digital networks among a myriad of existing and emerging platforms for remote socialisation.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue documenting some instances of the influence of social media upon democratic politics reveal a complex picture that should lead us to be wary about celebratory accounts. It is clearly necessary to avoid the utopian optimism of the earlier experiments in digital democracy. Yet they do also point to the potential of disruptive moments and actions which open the possibilities for some co-construction of networks and platforms where the formation, maintenance and defence of political positions may be played out. Such relational sources of power may be shaped through access to or exclusion from lifestyle choices, their degree of inclusion to or exclusion from nodes of authoritative meaning, and the opportunities they provide for competitive advantage over other groups and interests. Their mapping and analysis in future research could therefore provide important understandings of our contemporary political landscape.

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[i] The articles in this special issue were selected from a range of papers presented at the *iCS* symposium on *Networking Democracy* which took place in June 2010 in the Romanian city of Cluj.