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The Technologization of Politics: The Internet and the Electronic Citizen

By Charlotte Yun

ABSTRACT

Dramatic shifts in technology have transformed the structures of civic participation and communication in the latter half of the 20th century, and optimistic presumptions purporting the global establishment of “e-democracy” has become a commonly understood concept. But reality has failed to demonstrate this ideal and has instead proven otherwise: whether online or offline, it is politics as usual. This paper explores the ramifications of online platforms for political engagement from a critical perspective. The author argues that sustaining political activity online in “user-powered,” democratized digital spaces is ultimately fruitless without offline mobilization. While contemporary Web 2.0 platforms for political activity have empirically proven mobilizing potential, a careful critical analysis of such case examples illustrate key misconceptions and the dangers of presuming that democratic potential of the internet will lead to overall civic improvement. Instead, what is observed is the extension of offline social and political realities into the digital realm.

KEYWORDS

e-democracy, internet, ICT, citizen, technologization, political communication

INTRODUCTION

“Imagine technology and democracy uniting to overcome distance and time, bringing participation, deliberation, and choice to citizens at the time and place of their choosing,” writes

scholar Keith Culver in 2003, during the dawn of Web 2.0, “E-democracy may be the 21st century’s most seductive idea.”¹

The vision of a globally technologized democracy is certainly tempting. Shifts in technology fostered by the rising sophistication of internet platforms and media have transformed the face of traditional political communications. The structure of communication alone has dramatically been altered since the rise of the internet: from written letters to instant messaging apps, time and space has become minimalized, perhaps to near-insignificance in the precarious arena of political communication. Yet, the subject of whether the internet is correlated to democratic participation and civic engagement is a decades-long question of study. More than a decade ago, Robert Putnam pointed out that political participation was driven by a society’s social capital, crafted by cultural and civic networks between people. Voluntary civic group activities strengthen social bonds and builds networks between citizens, ultimately contributing to societal benefits that Putnam coins as social capital (reciprocity, co-operation, mutual trust, information).² Technology, in contrast to reducing time and distance for information to reach its audience, has contributed to the decaying of social capital. The rise of television following the Second World War and the mass marketization of communication technologies has increasingly isolated citizens, depriving them of the need to seek out political engagement from neighbours and friends in their communities.³

¹ Keith Culver, “The future of e-democracy: lessons from Canada,” openDemocracy.net, accessed April 3, 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/null-edemocracy/article_1586.jsp

² John Nugent, “If E-Democracy Is the Answer, What’s the Question?” *National Civic Review* 90.3 (2001): 227

³ Robert Putnam, “Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America,” *Political Science and Politics* 28.4 (1993): 679

Whether one shares Putnam's views, it is certain that since the rise of the internet conflicting claims about the relationship between internet use and political involvement have been made. According to Kruikemeier *et al.*, such debates are centered on disagreements between scholars about the internet's impact on citizens' engagement in political activities.⁴ The debate presents a wide range of optimistic and skeptical claims about the effects of internet usage. "Optimistic scholars assert that the Internet has the potential to increase political involvement among citizens," the authors write, "The argument is that the variety of sources available online, combined with the lower costs of obtaining the information about candidates and the election, encourages citizens to learn more about politics and thus increases their engagement in politics."⁵ Pessimistic perspectives, alongside a similar argumentative vein as Putnam's, counter optimistic views with scrutiny:

"[T]here are those who claim that the internet only has a positive effect for those citizens who are already interested in politics. Citizens who are not 'engaged in the political process' are left behind. [...] This viewpoint implies that politics online 'mirrors traditional patterns' and is essentially 'politics as usual'..."⁶

In other words, the increasing usage of the internet merely improves the civic experiences of those who are already pre-engaged in democratic activity. The benefits on streamlining time and distance, while connecting people online, paradoxically also isolate individuals by narrowing their political interactions through a computer screen, or reduced them to mere "digital presence" only. Similar to the effects of television, pessimistic views could borrow from Putnam's

⁴ Sanne Kruikemeier, Guda van Noort, R. Vliegthart and C. H de Vreese, "Unraveling the effects of active and passive forms of political Internet use: Does it affect citizens' political involvement?" *New Media & Society* 16.6 (2014): 904

⁵ Kruikemeier *et al.*, 905

⁶ Kruikemeier *et al.*, 905

conclusion that the internet—while allowing one to be technically “active” online—remains yet another passive medium for the transmission of political communication, for it still fails to mobilize those who aren’t already pre-engaged with the political process.⁷

Perhaps, what these debates lack is detailed investigation regarding the validity of the technologization effects of political activity on its own, separate from any prescriptive analysis. The problem with such a “world citizenry” vision is precisely in itself: the project exists as an idea only. The prospect, as of 2015, remains conflicting and unverified.⁸ Empirical evidence paint a different picture, one that is just as mixed and perplexing as the political views of e-citizens.⁹ What is concrete, however, is that online channels of political communication have instead mirrored or inherited similar power relations and institutional similarities as from the non-digital realm. While it remains certain that the technologies of political outreach have diversified since the late 20th century, from television and radio to new media, these changes arguably neither positively nor negatively affect the democratic quality of political communication and participation. What is observed is rather the reflection (or mirroring) of pre-existing social and political inequalities already present in most liberal democratic societies, expanded into the digital realm.

The following paper will set out to demonstrate this view, and make the argument in line with previously mentioned critical literature. Starting with an examination into few common

⁷ Bo Nilsson and Eric Carlsson, “Swedish politicians and new media: Democracy, identity and populism in a digital discourse,” *New Media & Society* 16.4 (2014): 666

⁸ Stig Hjarvard, “From Mediation to Mediatization: The Institutionalization of New Media,” *Mediatized Worlds: Culture and Society in a Media Age*, 2014, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 126

⁹ Itai Himelboim, Ruthann Weaver Lariscy, Spencer F. Tinkham & Kaye D. Sweetser, “Social Media and Online Political Communication: The Role of Interpersonal Informational Trust and Openness,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56.1 (2012), 94

theoretical claims made in previous scholarly debates, it will attempt to address key criticisms drawing evidence from empirical studies in the last five years.

WEB 2.0 AND THE GENERATION OF ONLINE ‘PUBLIC SPHERES’

Definitions of Web 2.0 remain still contested and full of disagreements. For the purpose of this paper, Tim O’Reilly’s tech-centric approach to the term Web 2.0 will be used to offer a minimal working core of the phenomenon: websites or applications that offer platforms for user-generated content, building user networks and connections, and streamlined or simplistic design and operations for easier usability.¹⁰ Regardless, the term has been used to help scholars explain the creation of small-scale forms of political engagement through consumerism and the propagation of political communication over multiple web platforms, which generate a sociotechnological “public sphere” that serves as a digital space for democratic activity.¹¹

A commonly accepted feature of Web 2.0 is its user-centered approach to online applications. Such a feature enables the development of scalable networks created by users and the ability to generate individual content freely, thus is used to make the claim that accessibility to information has significantly improved.¹² Moreover, free and large-scale availability of news and information have impacted the heterogeneity and breadth of the audience. Using the features of Web 2.0, viral and mass marketing of key political news towards such audiences create exposure and increased interactive potential to civic engagement. Yet, while improving

¹⁰ Tim O’Reilly, “What is Web 2.0: Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software,” *Communications & Strategies* 1 (2007): 17

¹¹ Andrew Chadwick, “Web 2.0: New challenges for the study of e-democracy,” in *Connecting Democracy*, ed. Stephen Coleman & Peter Shane (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 51

¹² Itai Himelboim, Ruthann Weaver Lariscy, Spencer F. Tinkham & Kaye D. Sweetser, “Social Media and Online Political Communication: The Role of Interpersonal Informational Trust and Openness,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56.1 (2012), 107

accessibility through ease and convenience of use and lowering the costs of information transmission, the majority of individuals continue to remain isolated from further civic engagement. Consider, for instance, Larsson *et al.*'s (2012) study regarding Twitter users and their political engagement towards the Swedish 2010 elections.¹³ The authors discovered that while many users contributed generic tweets about the election, a minority did so to any larger degree. Further, what they constitute as the popular minority include "high end" users, comprised of "an elite [minority] affiliated with prominent positions in mainstream media or political life in general."¹⁴ They add, "high end users are politicians or established journalists and bloggers, who represented only the tip of the iceberg. But in terms of volume, they constitute a substantial part of the [overall microblogging] activity."¹⁵ Put another way, while accessibility may be improved and costs minimal, only those smaller segments of society with real-world popularity and status manage to become the most active and influential within online political spaces on networked Web 2.0 platforms. Arguably, this effect similarly copies pre-existing disparities in political participation within what occurs already through more traditional 20th century media, including newspaper opinion sections, television channels and radio programs. The speakers and the levels of diversity in political perspectives are dominated and occupied by similar elite members of online public spheres, as these individuals possess the wide-scale levels of resources and recognition to foster influence digitally.

The notion that increased access brings higher inclusivity and thus improving chances of political engagement is further challenged by the "viral quality" of select political topics. It

¹³ Anders Larsson & Hallvard Moe, "Studying political microblogging. Twitter users in the 2010 Swedish election campaign," *New Media & Society* 14.5 (2012): 740

¹⁴ Larsson & Moe, 740

¹⁵ Larsson & Moe, 741

should be noted that Web 2.0 was developed with the goal of prioritizing consumerist habits, and as a digital mechanism or extension of 20th century capitalist infrastructure.¹⁶ While high end users generate the most influence across networks, entertainment and applicability value of the content transmitted also come into play. The “virality” (or, the popularity and catchiness of select content) of select subjects comprise also the majority of information in online public spheres. Mass marketing of news and political communication online improves access, speed and convenience, and yet it certain forms of political topics dominate the most spaces above others. Effectively, Web 2.0 public spheres create a pattern of political activity that could be termed “hashtag democracy”—or, the potential for information to be reduced to an online trend or tabloid subject. Accordingly, such phenomena pushes aside non-popular and obscure issues from public discussion threads, and only few, popular, “eye-catching” subjects result in receiving dominant attention. Larsson *et al.*’s study illustrates this pattern, with publicity stunts such as the carving of a swastika on a Sweden Democrat Party candidate’s head by a reportedly Arab man dominating the majority of conversations.¹⁷ Information that connect with the majority shared interests of the audience and create the most entertainment value possesses most of the political momentum. Effectively, viral capability of political content reflects media habits already observed in non-digital, privately-owned mass media outlets. Whether increasing accessibility to publish and create political activity online contributes towards increased political engagement for all remains yet a questionable claim.

¹⁶ Andrew Chadwick, “Web 2.0: New challenges for the study of e-democracy,” in *Connecting Democracy*, ed. Stephen Coleman & Peter Shane (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 55

¹⁷ Ulrike Klinger & Jakob Svensson, “The emergence of network media logic in political communication: A theoretical approach.” *New media & society* (2014): 15. See also <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/18/swedish-elections-far-right>

CYBERSPACE AND SOCIOECONOMIC REALITIES

While technological shifts have reduced the costs of accessing the internet (e.g., cheaper smartphones), access alone does not suffice to remedy deficits in civic literacy and citizenry in socioeconomically marginalized communities. Content is widely-available online and free, open-source platforms permit increased political participation, according to Emmer *et al.* (2012),¹⁸ yet political activity, engagement and communication remain lacking in quality if not resolved in reality. Marginalized voices arguably continue to be excluded from becoming informed and engaged readers of political communication, and accordingly active and informed civic participants. For example, Hoffman (2011) discovered that while education levels did not impact political participation online in the United States, time availability and income did.¹⁹ Online participation was determined to be driven by income, time, cell phone usage, and party ID. While also driven by time, party ID, and smartphone usage, participation and engagement is additionally predicted positively by internet use and negatively by education.²⁰ Correspondingly, perhaps, barriers that obstruct citizens from receiving and pursuing education in the “real world” reflect the quality of their political activities online.

Opponents argue that open-source platforms and free news sites target laypeople—the information being presented is easy-to-digest, quick and costless. It is possible that civic literacy matters little in online political news, due to its sheer brevity and accessibility. Additionally, free, legitimized and professionalized platforms of civic engagement (e.g., openDemocracy,

¹⁸ Martin Emmer, Jens Wolling & Gerhard Vowe, “Changing political communication in Germany: findings from a longitudinal study on the influence of the internet on political information, discussion and the participation of citizens,” *European Journal of Communication* 37.3 (2012): 245

¹⁹ Lindsay Hoffman, “Participation or Communication? An Explication of Political Activity in the Internet Age,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 9 (2011): 229

²⁰ Lindsay Hoffman, “Participation or Communication?” 229

Wikipedia) allow almost anyone to engage and inform oneself in order increase their exposure to new modes of knowledge.

But the quality-vs.-quantity conundrum remains: being passive consumers of easy-to-digest political news does not necessarily promote nor engage further civic participation. Previous socioeconomic barriers, particularly education levels, significantly influence how certain audiences digest and understand such information. For example, news regarding the voting system in American elections would require readers to understand, at least at the preliminary level, the structure and functioning of the Electoral College system. Websites specializing in quick-to-digest news soundbites hardly ever provide such detail or educational aspects to further inform readers, due to brevity restrictions, for instance. What is more, working individuals living rarely possess enough leisure time to inconveniently seek out and consume information online that would bridge civic literacy gaps in the long-term. It follows that political engagement and participation online is dominated by and comprised mostly of those with sufficient time and resources, in which the fora of traditional media already encompass.

INSTITUTIONALIZING THE INTERNET

Political information online continues to be shaped and mediated by both state and media conglomerates. While user-generated information is plenty and proliferates real-time, eliminating previous obstructions of time and space, references to traditional media sources as legitimate, authoritative sources for information is a norm.²¹ The mass absence of secondary filtering stages in information production processes such as fact-checking and copy editing further adds to the

²¹ Lindsay Hoffman, "Participation or Communication? An Explication of Political Activity in the Internet Age," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 9 (2011): 231

legitimacy dilemma of user-generated content. The perceived inequalities in “authenticity” and legitimacy already observed between mainstream and alternative information sources offline continue into the online sphere.

Increasing commercialization patterns of new media contributes also to the quantity-vs.-quality divide: commercialization influences the content of political information that is being disseminated, and information authority and legitimacy is increasingly controlled by media conglomerates extending their ownership and reach to online platforms. The purchase of Huffington Post by AOL in 2011,²² for example, demonstrates the increasing precariousness of information diversity in media agenda-setting on the internet. Conversely, however, in the case study of the Arab Spring in 2011, user-generated content and phenomena such as “citizen reporting” gave rise to mass political mobilization effects.²³ Aouragh and Alexander (2011) discovered in their study on the Egyptian experience:

“[T]his time, the cynicism was proved wrong. The ratio between those prepared to make their dissent visible online and those prepared to go into the streets and physically take on the security apparatus certainly shifted, and can be considered one crucial tipping point in the process of revolution. However, it is important to understand that this was not just about a higher proportion of online dissenters being willing to join the vanguard of activists who were prepared to expose their physical selves to arrest, beatings, even torture and death in order to confront the regime. [... The] next tipping point was reached when enough of the activists who did organize online found a mechanism to reach and mobilize sufficient numbers of Cairo’s urban masses (largely from the majority of Egyptians who are not online and for whom the Internet was not their primary sphere of dissidence) in order to shift the balance of forces in street confrontations with the police.”²⁴

²² James Compton & Paul Benedetti, “Labour, new media and the institutional restructuring of journalism.” *Journalism Studies* 11.4 (2010): 496

²³ Miriam Aouragh & Anne Alexander, “The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution,” *International Journal of Communications* 5 (2011): 1354

²⁴ Aouragh & Alexander, “The Egyptian Experience,” 1355

Alternative sources of news and public affairs, such as Wikileaks, have further garnered wide scale reputation for legitimacy and authenticity. One could oppose the previous view and argue that media conglomerate control empirically does not add a competing fight for source authenticity or legitimacy; in fact, the expansion of media conglomerates into previously unregulated online spaces could be noted as a hindrance to balanced and “freer” political reporting.

But while new media was indeed a critical factor in the Arab Spring, it nevertheless was not the only factor. In the absence of open media, authoritarian systems have already pre-existing discord and tensions that found its footing in the dynamic and accessible outlets of the internet. The causes of the Arab Spring were rather non-technological at its root. Younger citizens, comprised of tech-literate and materially well-off students and youth composed the majority of those in protest, and had simply been users of social media and online communication methods at the time.²⁵ While the internet does possess significant social mobilization powers, its purpose is fruitless without the influence of offline activity. Rather, what the Arab Spring illustrates is that expressions of political dissent were not created due to mere effects of social media and user-generated info, but made cogent, cohesive and unified by such technology.²⁶ The Egyptian experience demonstrates that political communication and participation online is meaningless without political action offline.

Conglomerate media institutions have additionally extended their reach into online spheres, in effect mirroring their activities in the non-digital marketplace and the capitalist logic

²⁵ Miriam Aouragh & Anne Alexander, “The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution,” *International Journal of Communications* 5 (2011): 1352

²⁶ Habibul Haque Khondker, “Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring.” *Globalizations* 8 (5): 678

of liberal democratic societies. It is certainly the case that market monopolies demonstrates selection bias and questionable levels of veracity in content, and similarly true that alternative sources of political news remain authentic in their reporting. As previously cited studies reveal, however, most online users are laypeople who rely on heavy marketing and publicity to discern which media outlets to seek for political information. Online channels that possess majority market share of visitors and hits are mainstream media corporations (e.g., The New York Times, BBC) with extensions in non-digital streams (print, television, radio). In fact, alternative media outlets further rely on mainstream exposure owned by media conglomerates in order to gain audience and readership. Wikileaks, for example, would not have possessed the viral quality and reputation it did without the initial exposure by The Guardian. It existed prior to the Collateral Murder video, noted for its virality, for instance, publishing data leaks back to 2006.²⁷

CONCLUSION

Whether these effects mark a new era for online political activity is a moot question. The internet undoubtedly offers new opportunities in mobilizing citizens who are not only easily reachable on a massive scale never before achieved, but viable solutions remain so far few in between. On this note, any discussion about future trends must be done with caution. While traditional media remains the most preferred source of political information, followed by consumption of online content, leaving behind spaces of online interactions, and social media in particular,²⁸ political activity online without real-world mobilization is an ineffective and weak

²⁷ Yochai Bankler, "Free Irresponsible Press: Wikileaks and the Battle over the Soul of the Networked Fourth Estate," *Harv. CR-LL Rev.* 46 (2011): 311.

²⁸ Lindsay Hoffman, "Participation or Communication? An Explication of Political Activity in the Internet Age," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 9 (2011): 231

method for improving overall democratic quality. Despite deficits in present literature offering solutions to mitigate the issue, new media has proven certain utility to assist and streamline mobilization processes for those already politically active in the non-digital realm. Over time, demographic shifts and technological changes may offer opportunities to bridge this gap, but caution must be exercised when furthering the technologization of political activity. Higher quality engagement online and increased mobilization offline may be two tenable ideas and tools to optimize online political spaces.

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