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Civic Political Engagement and Social Change in the new digital age

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Over recent decades, research on the internet and political participation has substantially developed, from speculative studies on possible impacts in social and economic life to detailed analyses of organizational usage. In the field of politics focus is increasingly shifting from understanding organizational, or supply side, to the usage and dimension of citizen engagement. Citizens have various ways to engage in civic political life, with many new forms of engagement facilitated by digital technologies. The question is to what extent these forms of engagement have any impact on society and the way society is governed. More particularly, what forms of engagement have impact, what type of impact is evidenced, is that impact positive or negative, in what ways and for whom?

Phrasing the question in this way recognizes that citizen engagement can have a range of differing impacts, in multifaceted forms, and these impacts may not always be positive for broader society.

Civic political engagement is at the center of political science research, especially concentrating on voting behavior and what are described as traditional forms of political participation: demonstrating, contacting elected representatives or joining political organizations. While these remain core to democratic society, debates are emerging surrounding new forms of participation offered by new digital wave era technologies. In particular, should we recognize actions facilitated by the participatory opportunities offered by new communication platforms (such as social networks and microblogs) as forms of political participation? The US election campaigns of 2008 and 2012, and Barack Obama's engagement with interactive communication and empowerment of citizens through his campaigning strategy, has led to new thinking around how political communication can be performed. Obama's campaign happened against a backdrop of activism among those Karpf (2012) describes as 'Internet-mediated issue generalists': citizens who populate forums, contribute to blogs and initiate petitions. Data suggests that the mechanisms for facilitating political participation are evolving alongside technological innovations.

Across most advanced industrial democracies citizens use the online environment to provide and gather information, to network with colleagues, friends and supporters and to interact. Equally, political candidates and parties colonize the digital environment in order to persuade through the provision of information and harness the free labour of their supporters. Political organizations utilize digital technology in ways that follow the political logic of traditional campaigning. Citizens, on the other hand, use the online environment for networking and information seeking, using the affordances of technology largely for their personal and professional gratification. Certainly some citizens meet with political actors online, but research

tends to indicate these are the already converted who are willing to extend the reach of the parties and candidates they support through reposting material. The individuals less understood are those who are independently engaging with political material, who themselves produce content and comment on weblogs, Facebook or Twitter, or who become aware of political issues through their networks. It is these people, the politically engaged citizens, whom we place at the heart of this special edition exploring what forms of participation they engage in and whether these forms are likely to have a wider impact upon society.

Civic engagement and democratic politics

Democratic participation, though a highly contested concept, may be understood as the extended involvement of individuals in a collective political decision-free and/or decision-making process. It has been argued that with power in the hands of the modern state or global corporations and institutions, rather than the citizen, and the lack of knowledge and interest in politics among the citizenry limits participation to voting in processes for electing political elites only. The potential that the Internet may offer for increasing participation has been a subject of some debate for almost two decades. However most early empirical data offered few optimistic indications, as in the late 1990s the Internet seemed to have no effect on increasing political participation. The reason, referred to as 'a digital divide' (Norris 2001), identifies the gap between those politically active (male, educated, mid-aged, wealthier) and non-active which shaped both Internet access and participation (Hindman 2009). Later studies on political engagement and the possible influence of the Internet have revisited the topic, stressing the emergence of new forms of online political participation (Xenos and Moy 2007; Boulianne 2009). More recently, the emergence of new Web 2.0 communication technologies have further challenged the view that a participatory or semi-deliberative democracy remains a much an utopian ideal now as when proposed by Sartori (1976). The Internet is now suggested to have the potential and means to change the existing status-quo building upon work stressing the importance of networked politics (Bang 2003). The work on democratic participation must constantly be revisited in order to keep pace with technological developments, new forms of social communication and how these are also shaping political engagement. Does the co-creation of political content, adaptation and sharing information and facilitating open political discussions in the "digital agora" (Kirk and Schill 2011), suggest a more deliberative democracy is emerging?

Re-imagining civic engagement in the digital age

Political participation has traditionally been viewed within fairly narrow terms. To be active in politics a citizen must participate in voting, campaigning, contacting representatives and officials and pressure group membership and activism (Verba & Nie, 1972: Verba et al, 1995). These actions can take place within a number of environments, on the street or on Facebook, but must the explicit purpose of influencing the selection or actions of decision makers. Whether a citizen takes part in a political march on a government building, signs an online petition or contacts their representative on Facebook, the objective must be to have impact on governance.

Thee affordances of digital technologies facilitate a range of other actions, however, which can involve the promotion, investigation, discussion and curation of political material. In the case of these activities, the intended or actual impact is unclear. Studies find a range of 'non-traditional forms of participation' are facilitated by digital technology and take place within

online environments (McLeod et al, 1999; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Early studies focused on the challenge weblogs and independent websites posed to traditional media and official sites of government or political organizations which inform and persuade citizens. The majority of the activities enabled by the first wave of digital technology, the Web 1.0 era, largely can fit within the traditional paradigm of political participation. However, the forms of political engagement facilitated by the second digital wave, the so-called Web 2.0 era technologies, associated with social media platforms, have proven less easy to identify and classify. Web 2.0's defining characteristic is the upending of the producer-audience model of mass communication meaning that citizens are no simply able to connect with politicians as well as other citizens interested in political issues (Coleman and Spiller 2003; Jackson and Lilleker 2009) but also produce content which contests the communication hegemony dominated by limited numbers of political and media players (Bolton, 2006). The concept of Web 2.0, it is argued, has facilitated the creation of a Fifth Estate constituted of "the connected people" (Crouzet 2007). The notion that anyone with a connection to the Internet can 'do' politics in some form, some scholars propose, makes for a more vibrant, chaotic and non-hierarchical political communication environment (Chadwick, 2009).

The concept of online engagement facilitated by the Internet divides academia. Some studies confirm that online tools enhance learning (Cho et al. 2003), build communities (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker 2013) or groups of online advocates (Koch et al. 2011), and encourage different forms of engagement (Shah et al. 2007; Gil de Zuniga et al. 2009). An interactive online community built around a shared interest is claimed to have clear potential to enhance democratization processes (Castells 2009) and may have a significant impact on the self-efficacy of citizens (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2009). Regardless of the fact only a minority may participate, and even less have the potential to be heard and so have influence (Hindman 2009), if citizens can witness social and political impacts from their actions within online networks they will increase their activism (Sotirovic and McLeod 2001; Gil de Zuniga et al 2009, 2010). If citizens feel empowered through the affordances of digital technologies they are more likely to remain activate and participate in activism within more diverse groups constituted of the connected (Margolis and Moreno-Riano 2009). There is, despite the evidence that actual impact is limited, significant potential for digital technologies to have a positive impact upon democratic participation, through enhancing political knowledge and facilitating political discussion and activism (Chadwick 2006; Ward and Vedel 2006). Researchers have also argued that the Internet can also draw new participants to political engagement by lowering the barriers to participation and facilitating communication among citizens but also between citizens and elected officials. They argue that many Internet users when engaged by material they read online proceed generally to seek more information, so become more knowledgeable, more interested in politics and ultimately more engaged (Jennings and Zeitner 2003; Wang 2007; Xenos and Moy 2007). The greater levels of engagement lead those citizens to enjoy greater knowledge about current affairs and participate more intensively offline (Koc-Michalska, Vedel & Chiche 2015), also these citizens have greater certainty of their electoral choices (Vedel and Koc-Michalska 2007).

The largely positive view offered by mobilization theory, as outlined above, is contrasted by adherents to reinforcement theory. The reinforcement theory suggests the affordances of digital technology can only strengthen citizens' existing patterns of engagement, so only facilitating the engagement of citizens who are already politically active. Online political activity requires willingness to engage with political information, the fact that evidence shows the majority of

Internet browsers seek only entertainment means they will be no more likely to engage in online political participation as they would offline (Margolis and Resnick 2000). Whether accidental exposure to political information serves as a mobilization factor is hotly debated (Gil de Zuniga, 2010), in particular whether viewing then expressing approval for political content may act as a pathway to further participation. Critics argue many new forms of political participation are low effort and so evidence low involvement and engagement (Morozov, 2011). The cyber skeptic position suggests there is little or no relation between Internet use and political participation, political knowledge or efficacy (Zhang and Chia 2006; Koch 2005).

The complex theoretical debates particularly concern developments within the second digital wave. The rise of purely online and social media support increased chances for accidental exposure and myriad forms of engagement; yet there is little empirical evidence to support any particular perspective, positive or negative. Some researchers argue media has a positive informative and mobilizing role (Norris, 2000), others extend the findings that media contribute only to political cynicism, inefficacy or disengagement (Putnam, 2000) to suggest social media may have a similar effect on political engagement (Morozov, 2011). Capturing some of the insights from studies of the 2012 elections, we can suggest that there are some indications that usage of social media has enhanced political participation for those who previously would not have engaged (Chadwick, 2012, Koc-Michalska et al. 2014). The Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 showed how minority groups and young people became participants in the campaign (Barr, 2009). Data from analyses of the French 2012 elections observed social media activity does not follow the traditional gender and generational gap identified for political engagement (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2013). The data from these studies reinforce the perspective that online participation has a cumulatively reinforcing effect: performing any one action leads to performing further, more complex, actions. The question, however, is whether we are seeing a cumulative process of empowerment and activism due to the impact of myriad form of political engagement and participation facilitated by the second wave of digital technological innovation; it is this question to which the research in this volume seeks to respond.

A new research agenda

Research shows that digital technologies facilitate three broad forms of behavior: seeking information, discussing politics and participation in campaigns. In particular we find that all three forms of behavior are positively correlated and that participating in any one of these actions may reinforce participating in the others (Kirk and Schill, 2011). The challenge researchers face, however, is what constitutes these activities. Does accidental exposure result from passive browsing through a Facebook news feed, and so is this a form of information seeking, for example? Similarly, is any contribution of text that is in some way political a contribution to a big conversation as perhaps Shirky (2008) would suggest? We might also question whether the clicktivist activities, clicking the like, share or retweet buttons for example, as well as the simple click to sign an online petition or send a stock email to an elected representative, should be treated as participation in a campaign. Clearly all these activities conform to the general notion of political participation, they fit with the traditional paradigm and might have influence over decision makers if acting in tandem with a critical mass of activists. But critics who suggest these are clicktivist forms argue these are also fairly basic or weak forms of participation. The debate on whether such actions are meaningful or not are likely to continue over many years, and these debates are likely to occupy many volumes of research.

Setting the fundamental question of what is participation aside, there is much at this stage to do in terms of understanding what political actions citizens participate in within social media sites and platforms. Due to the speed of innovation, of the uptake in use and the relative youth of Web 2.0, there remains a lack of research on the role and effects of new tools offered by Web 2.0. There are a range of complex and multifaceted affordances offered by a range of platforms that constitute the modern digital environment. These include the range of social networking sites which facilitate peer-to-peer interactivity as well as having become a site for political and corporate advertising; to what extent are the sites politicizing and host political discussion and connect citizens who are interested in political issues or have partisan affiliations. Other spaces, such as forums, become populated by citizens with shared interests, a shared agenda and who seek to have impact through collaboration and connectivity.

Recent years have also seen the popularization of purely online media, these platforms challenge traditional media outlets in breaking news and debating current affairs while also offering a platform to alternative voices, citizens can make and debate news and so have the potential to shape the media agenda; to what extent is this potential realized. Similarly, any citizen or organization can create themselves a space online where content can be generated and within which communities can form. The popularization of weblogs, for example, has led to the rise of an online commentariat who use a range of participatory spaces to have their say, gain feedback and, again potentially, to impact on other citizens' attitudes as well as on media and political elites. Such spaces can replace traditional, mainstream media outlets as sources of political information. The online commentariat can create a range of forms of 'viewer-created' content, not just text in comments, conversations or weblog posts but also more sophisticated content utilizing filesharing sites for videos, YouTube, or picture uploaded to Flickr, Instagram and curated on Pinterest. All of these platforms, and the many more which will be created as part of this digital content creation revolution, can be used for recording mundane activities such as the breakfast menu, for the gratification of the self and others when taking and editing pictures of cats, or for more serious political purposes.

Engagement and impact: the new participatory environment

The purpose of this special issue is to collect scholarly work exploring what activities are undertaken, where and with what potential impact.

The edition will begin a meta-analysis which sets out the current literature in the field. Skoric, Zhu, Goh and Pang's study examines the first phase of the development of the social media, from its wide spread beginning in 2007 to 2013 when the establishing and banalization phase began (including the elections cycle of 2012). The paper collects data from 22 articles and conducts Pearson correlation analysis to determine a 'pure' effect of social media on participatory activities without the impact of other controlling variables. The analysis shows a dominant positive relationship between the social media variables and political or civic participation, however despite differing strengths of correlation any negative correlations were not found statistically significant. The data analysis leads to the claim that social media is a non-disengaging medium but also not a revolutionary one, with rather medium not strong effects.

The next two papers offer reasonably broad analyses of general trends in online activities: the propensity of social media users to gaining political knowledge or awareness through accidental exposure (Boulianne) and the impact of accidental exposure on political and/or civic

engagement (Valeriani and Vaccari). The papers use different methodological approaches, Valeriani and Vaccari uses comparative cross-sectional sample of Italian, German and British web users; in contrast Boulianne uses a panel study of young respondents in Canada. The papers lead to similar conclusions, overall the data shows there is potential for social media activity, even when activities are not specifically or explicitly political, to have a beneficial influence on political participation, although the studies find that this effect may be mediated by different variables. In fact, Boulianne suggests that there is no statistically significant, direct impact from accessing information online or via social media on political engagement; however this effect is mediated by political awareness. Interestingly for this young sample of the population, the effects appear to differ according to participatory actions taken. There is a strong impact on voting and boycotting but no impact on signing petitions. Boulianne claims that the direct impact of social media on political engagement is rather weak but that it is strongly mediated by the information gained via social media. Similarly Valeriani and Vaccari find a strong effect from accidental news exposure on social media, especially for those less interested in politics. The model is consistent across the three different political cultures they study: Germany, the UK and Italy. The paper discusses the potential role of online information accessibility on reducing the gap between those highly engaged citizens who are interested in politics and those not interested and rarely engaged. The findings confirm a strong effect from accidental exposure (reaching one-fourth of the sample) to the news on those who declare being less interested in politics, thus 'the rich get richer' reinforcement theory is not confirmed. The effect is consistent across all three countries but with different magnitudes suggesting differences between countries. The paper adds to the literature on the possible positive impact of news exposure online, and especially social media, on political participation within diverse political and media systems. The authors therefore propose future research on causality as well as on the nature and persistency of participatory acts which result from accidental news exposure on social media. The fourth paper by Diehl, Weeks and Gil de Zuniga offer similar insights. In line with the previous two papers the authors search for the effect of social media use for news and for social activity, as a mediator for social persuasion. The paper, based on a US two-wave panel survey of a representative sample of citizens, explores to what extent people are willing to change their political decisions due to the effect of information gained on the social media. The potential effects of social media are examined across two different contexts: usage with the intention of accessing news and usage for social interaction (entertainment rather than civic focused behavior). The authors find evidence for both direct and indirect effects from social media usage regardless of whether usage was related to accessing news or for entertainment. The indirect impact is mediated by the heterogeneity of the networks citizens are connected to and whether discussions lead to disagreement, both of which facilitate political persuasion. The fifth and sixth papers are dedicated to in-depth analysis of social media's impact through case studies. First, Cantijoch, Galandini and Gibson explore the role of social networking websites dedicated to civic engagement in building civic society and increasing the efficacy levels of participants. The authors concentrate on a UK based platform MySociety which was designed to facilitate civic, local and national political participation. The study uses a mixed methodology, quantitative and qualitative, requiring users of the platform to record their behavior in diaries which provides insights into their emotional involvement. The mixed methods approach adopted develops an understanding of the links between offline activities as well as the incentives and motivations for engagement and how these lead to the growth of self-efficacy and further engagement actions. The findings confirm the reinforcement hypothesis that online participatory sites mostly attract those already engaged, simply offering them a new,

easier, means to participate in civic life. However participation has a strong impact on self-efficacy, underlining the importance of community 'spirit, actions and impact' for encouraging collective (connective) action. Local online social networks, even if not building as strong ties as interpersonal offline relations, provide the feeling of connectedness and belonging to the local community. While the findings are limited to those who frequently connect via the MySociety network, the data shows the factors that enhance engagement are recognition from the other community members as well as from the authorities suggesting broader applicability in understanding the role of civic organizations in empowering citizens and enhancing their potential for political participation. The final article is also a case study. Boynton and Richardson conduct a big data analysis of posts on Twitter relating to the around the Snowden affair. The article presents a new approach for understanding agenda setting, which not only revisits the role of the traditional media in setting the agenda but also reframes the analysis of social media, exploring the role of Twitter as a new potential agenda setter. The authors analyze the Snowden's case, the leaking of files covering the actions of national security agencies is one of the most controversial issues in recent international politics. Their analysis allows readers to understand the longitudinal flow of Twitter communication in an international context. The patterns show significant lateral flows between users, but a lack of evidence that traditional media (well established media outlets) are a key source of information and citation. Rather, Twitter users have a significant role in setting the mainstream media agenda.

Cumulatively then the articles show a mixed but tentatively positive picture of how social media contributes to citizen engagement with civic and political life. The effects, as Skoric et al. note from analyzing data from previous studies, medium rather than strong. But there are clear effects. Accessing political information online, even perhaps accidentally via a Facebook news feed can lead, as hypothesized by exponents of the mobilization theory, to further information seeking, interacting with others and further participatory forms of behavior. Citizens can also be persuaded to think more and to change the attitudes that inform their voting behavior through being exposed to political material and interactions on social media. Naturally, all the authors find there are a range of intervening variables which impact upon the effects, and these open up further avenues for future research. Our studies also show that some forms of participation offer a sense of empowerment, within communities as well as the potential to impact upon the mainstream media agenda and perhaps informing and impacting on decision makers' thinking and deliberation when deciding on political responses to issues of the day. These data suggest social media is not simply a contained environment, but that these platforms are monitored and are able to have 'real-world' impact when a critical mass of users are involved in concerted action.

As with all research on the every changing environment, these findings need corroboration with further studies utilizing a range of alternative methods of enquiry, and the effects and their intervening variables may well change across nations, demographics and over time as further innovations impact on the forms and styles of citizen engagement in politics. However the contributors to this edition make a significant contribution in suggesting that citizen engagement can have positive personal impacts, through empowerment, as well as social impacts. The authors all suggest citizens who engage with political materials on social media appear more likely to be more engaged, more informed and will be more likely to take an active future role in democratic life as a result of participating in social media-based political activism. Tentatively then, we suggest there is a positive social media effect on political participation and that we should abandon the barrier between traditional and non-traditional forms of

participation; we should have a broader definition of political participation which encompasses all forms which could, even if unintentionally, have an impact on the processes and deliberations that shape our world.

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