INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 'NEW NORMAL'

Special Issue Editors

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THE INTERNET, SOCIETY AND POLITICS

In his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1963) Marshall McLuhan argued that when new media technologies are introduced they have the capacity to disrupt tradition and reshape social life. While focusing on the transition he was witnessing from print to television, his analysis is perhaps just as prescient when thinking of the impact of the Internet on social and political life. Digital technologies have been argued to have revolutionised everything they have touched in the last three decades; incrementally altering the processes of communication to lead to an age of interactive co-creation. The Internet and social media have multiplied the channels of political communication and created the new role of the citizen as content provider or "citizen journalist", thereby changing communication patterns in a significant way. At the same time, digital media have opened up new opportunities for interaction between representatives and represented, between political and societal actors. Some scholars have pointed to the fact that power constellations have been changed by digitalization (Castells, 2009: 42–50; Meraz, 2009). Others emphasize the potential for changing citizens' political behaviour by, for example, increasing interest in politics and the likelihood of voting (Kersting and Baldersheim, 2004; Mossberger et al., 2007) or the potential for increasing the capacity for political engagement (Rheingold, 1993; Luengo, 2009).

That innovations in information and communication technology (ICT) give rise to questions relating to the impact on politics and society is nothing new. Controversies in the different disciplines – political science, sociology, and communications – in the past oscillated between the more positive interpretation highlighting the potential offered by new technologies, e.g. for gaining information, as well as the more negative interpretation underlining the cultural levelling and the fragmentation of the public sphere. In respect to the Internet these controversies are echoed. Since the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s we can find net-optimists as well as net-pessimists – or in the words of Anthony G. Wilhelm neofuturists, dystopians and technorealists (Wilhelm, 2000: 14ff). Although there exists consensus about the fact that digital media have an enormous impact, opinions diverge on the direction and the quality of this impact. Hence, we find a considerable ambivalence when it comes to assessing the impact of digital media for political communication, political processes, interaction and decision making. A very good illustration of this avenue of debate is constituted by the polemic discussion around "fake online news" which is considered a serious threat to democratic processes, especially after the 2016 US presidential race. Fuelled by conspiracy theorists and posted on social media sites like Reddit, Facebook and Twitter, the story picked up so much relevance that both Google and Facebook have announced that they will ban fake news sites from using their ad networks to prevent the spread of false information. A majority of the so-called millennials rely on the Internet to get political news and their consumption of information is summary and fleeting meaning they might be caught in the trap of those who benefit from propagating half-truths or simply lies. Those communication dynamics in the social media environment likely had a prominent impact on the electoral outcome in the USA, they are also flourishing in other parts of the world: France, Germany, Italy, Brazil, India or Australia.

Although the disenchantment with politics and the political elite is not a new phenomenon but rather constitutes an incremental process we observe already for some decades, the feelings of disempowerment, disillusionment and the remoteness of the majority from the elite seems to have increased in many societies. The election of political outsider, property magnate and celebrity Donald Trump in America, the resurgence of right-wing populist movements in many nations and the UK's Brexit vote are the political outcomes of disaffection. Rather than feeling connected and empowered, many citizens feel quite the reverse (Gest and Gray, 2015). It seems that citizens may be better connected to one another, and have greater access to elites. To what degree however we equally find evidence of disconnection is a question which needs more examination. The emergence of "new" political parties in some parts of Europe can be interpreted as an example of the results of this disconnection. Far from being a phenomenon of "second order", the rise of these parties indicates a deep structural change in the political space. Mainstream parties face great difficulties in responding to citizen's new demands in this new communication context. The increasing medialization of politics is leading to greater visibility and importance of the candidate/leader to the detriment of the party apparatus. With new technologies of information and communication, party leaders/candidates can interact directly with the public, favouring charismatic personal leadership, which is a typical feature of populism (Luengo et al., 2016). Therefore, the increasing role of the Internet, online platforms and social media has been crucial in the proliferation of populist political projects, giving increased visibility and influence to extreme, radical, anti-establishment or outsider parties.

In sum, the impacts of the Internet are legion. The affordances offered by these technologies are able to accelerate ideas, connect people and build communities that can exact change. The impact is equally strong in the realm of political communication. The Internet has been found to have altered the dynamics of various areas of socio-politics: international relations, processes of policy making, governmental performance, citizen's demands, political accountability, electoral campaigns, and even geopolitical tensions (Kersting, 2012; Luengo, 2016). These changes have led scholars and researchers to pursue new approaches and reconsider theories, methodologies and strategies, in order to face these challenging and ever-evolving research conditions. The Internet and its diverse manifestations have reconfigured many of the processes which underpin the operation of modern society. However, we are not fully able to understand and explain the concrete direction: towards more or less democracy, more or less inclusion, more or less participation etc.

The conundrums and contradictions were at the heart of the motivations for a conference held in Rovinj, Croatia in October 2015. The topic was "Communication, Democracy and Digital Technology", organised by a committee formed from three research clusters of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) covering Electronic Democracy (RC10), Political Communication (RC22) and the Quality of Democracy (RC34). The contributors to the event, some of which feature in this volume, focused on the intersection between the three strands of political science represented; each of which ask questions of vital importance for the well-being of democracy globally. These questions

revolve around measures, standards and analyses of the quality of democracy, the role of political communication in enhancing democracy and the extent that the technological affordances claimed as implicit in digital technologies offer real potential for a richer, interactive and co-created politics. The work here therefore contributes to a broader enquiry on how communicative acts, particularly but not exclusively those which take place using digital technologies, contribute positively or negatively to the quality of the democratic experience citizens enjoy and so to building and sustaining active democracies.

COMMUNICATION, DEMOCRACY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Electronic Democracy

There is an ever growing body of work on digital political communication and on online participation, with a particularly strong focus on how government, NGO's, political parties and candidates use technologies in the course of election campaigns and beyond. Evidence shows the latest tools, in particular social media platforms, are an embedded element of campaign and communication strategy (Lilleker et al., 2015). However any revolutionary impacts stem from the interactions of citizens not political actors (Vergeer, 2013). There is little evidence of a more interactive or consultative style of representative democracy emerging, rather campaigning on Twitter and Facebook resembles its pre-Internet broadcasting paradigm. Political communication online tends to follow a campaign logic, focusing on winning votes and not establishing lines of communication (Larsson, 2016). The more innovative political engagement occurs at the level of the citizen in so-called third spaces, forums where people can commune about issues of concern to them (Wright, 2012). The problem is that this highlights the disconnect between public political communication which takes place across a variety of spaces and elite political communication which occurs in a controlled manner in controlled environments (McChesney, 2015).

An important discussion in this context relates to the concept of e-government and online participation in the invited space (see Kersting, 2013). Here it could be shown that combining online and offline participatory instrument could enhance the quality of deliberation. OECD published a working paper on "Social media use by governments" in 2014 which stressed that social media can help governments to improve communications, both regular and emergency. Yet, in the same report it is argued that "much potential is still undiscovered when it comes to using social media to transform policy processes, make decisions more transparent and processes more inclusive, and develop more responsive and more efficient public services" (Mickoleit, 2014: 7). Moreover, it is argued that these new dialogic, co-creation platforms should produce active, engaged citizens congregating in codecisive, dialogic spaces 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Zavattaro and Sementelli, 2014: 262). However, the authors discuss that these dialogic potentials are often not fully realized. To the contrary, these new platforms may even increase public distrust (Im et al., 2014) and encourage political cynicism hence enabling "incompetent citizens" to engage in political processes (see discussion in Zavattaro and Sementelli, 2014, on Lippmann's omnicompetent citizen and social media).

Quality of Democracy

The emergence of the Internet has generated extensive debate about the potential effects on democratic processes and fuelled a range of different expectations, some of them associated with utopian hopes (Buchstein, 1997; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Diamond and Plattner, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Hague and Loader, 1999; Hindman, 2008; Wilhelm, 2000). Against the background of increasing political disenchantment among citizens, the perceived disconnection between citizens and politicians and the loss of trust in political institutions that can be observed in established democracies in recent decades, e-democracy has been regarded (often overstated) as a panacea capable of curing democratic fatigue and revitalizing or modernizing democratic processes (Kersting and Baldersheim, 2004; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Kneuer, 2013; 2016).

It is held that enhanced interaction online will increase transparency, making it possible to retrieve and offer more information; promote inclusion by giving social actors (especially marginalized ones) better opportunities to contribute to the formation of public opinion outside institutionalized channels and without the filtering function of the traditional media; open up alternative opportunities for participation, allowing people to be more involved in political decision-making processes over the Internet; and strengthening the responsiveness of political actors since represented and representatives can easily enter into dialogue on social media. Moreover, advocates of alternative forms of democracy such as deliberative or direct democracy see digital media as facilitating new opportunities for citizen deliberation and direct decision-making (Barber, 1998; see also Buchstein, 1997; Dahlgren, 2013; Kersting, 2013). Even the vision of citizens' self-government – evoking the Athenian ideal of a virtual agora or ekklesia – seems to have renewed relevance as a possible model for future democracy. Finally, digital media are credited with creating new opportunities for civil society, social movements or even new actors (grassroots movements) to make their voices heard and influence the public agenda (van de Donk et al., 2004; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003). A very good example of these new alternatives for citizen participation in political decisions is, among others, Appgree[1]. It was created in 2013, and explores new possibilities of civil engagement in policy making, and has been used by some of those emergent parties mentioned before.

The study of the democratizing potential of digital media often follows a normative or prescriptive approach – either net-optimistic or net-pessimistic overall – that hypothesizes an improvement (or not) in the quality of democracy. By contrast, the premise here is that technology is not a democratizing force per se (Kneuer, 2013; 2016). Technology is ex ante neutral, and its effect on political structures, processes, actors, behaviour and norms depends on the motives of use, the content that is transmitted, the way the technology itself is used (quantitatively and qualitatively speaking) and finally on the political context in which the digital media are used. Quite a few scholars apply such a techno-realistic approach to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Barber, 1998; Buchstein, 1997; Leggewie, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000; Kersting, 2012; Kneuer, 2013). They assume that

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[1] Appgree is a platform that uses a technology that breaks away from the traditional communication model, giving groups a voice, no matter their magnitude, and offering an original and plausible way of reaching collective decisions (http://www.appgree.com/appgree/en/).

the impact of the Internet on the development or quality of democracy is ambivalent: it can enrich and enhance democratic values and processes, but at the same time it can constitute a stress factor for democratic processes and harm the quality of democracy and political discourse (Kersting, 2005). This stance toward the impact of digital media constitutes the point of departure of this special issue.

INTRODUCING THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The issue is divided into three thematic sections: *E-democracy*; *Public deliberation* and *Social media and political discourse*.

The first section contains four studies of open government and digital participatory platforms in several countries. They all build on the assumed potential of digital technologies to bridge the gap between political representatives and increasingly distrustful and disengaged citizenry. The opening article by Emiliana De Blasio and Michele Sorice is a comparative study of the open government agendas and participatory platforms in France, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom. De Blasio and Sorice apply frame analysis to examine key national policy documents related to open government and the actual implementation of those policies throughout a number of national digital platforms. They conclude that transparency and digital technologies are the most prominent issues within the open government agendas in all examined countries, whereas participation and collaboration remain less considered and less implemented. The article by Rebecca Rumbul examines the attitudes of citizens using civic technologies in the UK, South Africa, Kenya and the USA. She uses survey-based methodology to examine whether use of civic technologies – as platforms that operate at the intersection of e-government and civil society – increases personal external efficacy and alters the confidence citizens hold in their respective governments. Her study includes five civic technology sites available in the four examined countries. The findings point to significant and interesting demographic variance in the use of civic technologies (such as the domination of male users in most examined countries) and indicate that a citizen-audit of government information through civic technologies increases feelings of external efficacy and perceived government accountability in developed and developing countries alike. Marta Rebolledo, Rocío Zamora Medina and Jordi Rodríguez-Virgili examine if and how the websites of 317 local councils in the Spanish regions of Murcia and Navarre fulfil the goals of transparency and participation. Despite some differences between the councils and the regions, the overall conclusion is that the examined local websites fail the test of transparency and that they offer only minimal incentives to encourage citizens' participation. In the last article in this section Ana Carolina Araújo, Lucas Reis and Rafael Cardoso Sampaio compare official websites of the five Brazilian cities with their associated "open data portals". The authors use two different scales to measure the transparency of the official websites and the quality of the open data initiatives. Their findings suggest that the official websites with higher levels of transparency are not necessarily those with the best open data initiatives.

The second section focuses on two cases of public deliberation. The Greek case is an example of a face-to-face public deliberation while the Spanish case is focused on the deliberative potential of digital platforms set up by political actors. Aside from their individual contributions, these two articles provide a valuable comparison between face-to-face and digitally facilitated public deliberation. The group of researchers led by Anastasia Deligiaouri implemented a variant of Fishkin's deliberative polling scheme to examine how public deliberation may increase political knowledge and consequently shift people's opinions. The deliberative event, evolving around the issue of political public opinion polling (its accuracy, accountability, the way it is being reported by the media etc.), took place in the Greek town of Kastoria and included 93 university students. The results of their study suggest that access to more information, deliberation and exchange of information between deliberators may inform people's opinion and consequently initiate a change in people's attitudes. Rosa Borge and Eduardo Santamarina Sáez offer insights into a new model of political engagement in their study of public deliberation in Spain. Their focus is on the platform created by Podemos, a political party whose roots are in the 15M movement, a grassroots protest organisation famous for occupying squares in order to directly challenge the authority of the government. Borge and Santamarina Sáez compare the style of deliberation within the Podemos platform to that within Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona in Common) a similar but smaller citizen platform launched in June 2014 that is currently governing in minority in the City of Barcelona. In both cases evidence suggests it is technically possible to set up online party spaces that are open, inclusive and self-managed by citizens and, when created, deliberation adheres to standards of discourse equality, reciprocity, justification and civility. However the more mainstream the party the less deliberative they are, and the less reactive they are to the public agenda.

The final section of this collection is concerned with the use of social media in debating highly polarizing political issues and mobilizing political support. Joan Balcells and Albert Padró-Solanet examine how Twitter was used in Spain to debate the issue of Catalonian independence. Their findings challenge the usual "homophily" pattern which assumes that people are inclined to communicate with only the like-minded. The researchers find that although Twitter users were clustered around two distinct poles, they frequently interacted with each other and crossed lines to exchange arguments and opinions. Moreover, Balcells and Padró-Solanet established that heterogeneous conversations (where opposing sides are engaged in a dialogue) tended to be significantly longer than homogenous ones (where all participants share the same view). The authors assign that to "genuine deliberation based on reasonably exchanging arguments between competing viewpoints". In her study of the 2014 Romanian presidential election, Laura Sibinescu's exploration of how voters and politicians interact through social media shows social media can provide an indication of which issues voters find salient. Similarly her data shows that politicians' responsiveness to these issues may have important consequences on their success or failure in high stakes political events, such as elections. The story is one where an insurgent challenger proved better able to tap into public opinion and beat an opponent who appeared out of touch. Social media was one vehicle for demonstrating the synergy between public opinion and the campaign agenda of Klaus Iohannis the winning candidate. In the closing article of the issue, Alena Macková and Vaclav Štětka

similarly show how some parties are more likely to engage with and attempt to mobilise support on social media. Perhaps again showing how insurgents attempt to leverage the affordances of digital technologies. However the uneven patterns of usage, particularly among candidates, indicates that not all citizens will be engaged by these activities and that some will be left behind as the party they feel close to might have a less interactive communication strategy. Macková's and Štětka's study reinforces the perspective of digital technology having the potential to have a positive impact on political engagement, but whether it does is in the gift of the political elite. Spanish grassroots parties, Romanian president Iohannis on his path to power and some Czech parties appear to be willing to challenge the traditional communication hierarchies; however they appear to be within a minority within the highest levels of electoral politics.

CONCLUSIONS

This issue provides a multidimensional comparative perspective on the role of digital technologies in contemporary democracies, which is particularly valuable given the significance of different media and political contexts in modern developments (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). It contradicts some of the dystopian scenarios that paint a picture of big data governance and the dominance of the algorithm and opens the mind for a more techno realistic perspective.

Online and offline political participation can be divided into four different political spheres: participation in representative democracy (elections, e-voting), participation in direct democracy (referendums, e-petitions), deliberative participation (forums, etc.) and demonstrative participation (demonstrations, expressive slacktivism) (see "the democratic rhombus", Kersting, 2016). Online participatory instruments seem to have as a strength mobilization and building up social networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Offline participation seems to be more useful for deliberation and deeper social networks. The articles in this collection demonstrate some of the pros and cons of digitalization. Some experiences are frustrating given the fact that expectations from techno-optimists regarding the new open agora betray strong beliefs that citizens will learn better netiquette and show mutual respect in online communication. Here the need for social equality and a better education are important prerequisites. But the articles also show that online participation can contribute to a qualification of democracy if it is organized properly. From good practices we can learn what contexts are favourable and how online communication has to be developed. Here the criteria for the quality of democracies as well as the quality of political discourses such as openness, control of power, and transparency become relevant. So one trajectory focuses on better participatory instruments; another trajectory seems to mix different instruments of offline participation (blended or hybrid participation). Deliberation, demonstration of opinions and direct voting are coming together. Representative and direct participation are intermingling. Nowadays, innovations in online digital participatory instruments are leading to a convergence of online and offline instruments. Often these instruments are combined in a blended participation reinforcing the better of the two worlds.

To conclude, we can point out that in forthcoming years research in political communication and democracy is going to be articulated around the implications of new technologies of information and communication. The Internet and social media will decisively shape the standards of the new normal in political communication. Moreover, they will become central to debates on the future of democratic life.

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