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THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN INCREASING YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the role new media can play in the political engagement of young people. Moving away from “deficit” models of youth participation that drove the interest in “civics” education in the 1990s, the paper argues two major points. First, that there is a comparatively well-established model of contemporary political mobilization that employs both new media and large data analysis that can be, and has been, effectively applied to young people in electoral and non-electoral contexts. The recent school climate strikes are cited as an example. Second, and more critically, the paper argues that new media, and particularly social media, are not democratic fora and their general use and adoption by young and older people does not cultivate democratic values. The focus on scale as drivers of influence, mass use of algorithms, and centralized editorial control of these platforms make them highly *participative*, but *illiberal* sites for political socialization and practice. Without the development of democratic structures within those institutions in which young people spend most of their time – families, training institutions, private civil society clubs – an emphasis on engagement and mobilization runs the risk of being simply “therapy” as articulated by Arnstein’s typology of civic participation types.

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the century, considerable scholarly and practitioner interest was placed on the way that the new internet-based technologies of email, websites, and online communities would “automatically” produce democratic improvements around the world. A combination of technological determinism and the ethos of Randian heroic individualism endemic in Silicon Valley (and its wannabe imitators), this view was that as “obviously” decentralized and open, the internet would create decentralized and open societies where it was adopted. As Benkler wrote in the *Wealth of Networks*, this technological arrangement “allows all citizens to change the relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes” (2006:272).

This brief paper contends it is unlikely that increased democratic participation is a function of increased use of contemporary internet media forms (social media). The primary reason for this position is distrust of the underlying technological determinism in these types of claims. At a second level, the type of post-war neo-liberal project that is the internet should be more commonly associated with drivers that have generated political disengagement and concerns about democratic participation in the first instance. Thus, rather than a cure, the types of factors that led to the internet as it developed from the 1990s onwards are more associated with the cause of democratic decline.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

New technologies provide new (or remediated²) “affordances” (those designed or accidental, visible or concealed capacities provided to human users; see: Livingstone and Das, 2013). From the late 1990s onwards, the nature of the internet to communicate, aggregate, and co-

² Existing affordances recreated or reimagined through new media.

ordinate has been associated with interest in its democratizing potential. This is frequently captured in the “cost” hypothesis: that the internet reduces the costs associated with political participation, and thus allows some “natural” human desire to be afforded in greater abundance than for our pre-internet selves (Negroponte 1995).

As previously argued (Chen, 2013), many of these types of claims have been predicated on loose understandings of the underlying character of the technology in question (for example, exaggeration of its “true” network characteristics in terms of actual data flows and through hierarchical government systems, like the DNS) and contestable claims about the impacts of the technology on existing economic and social practice (such as deterritorialisation). The “cost”³ claim so important to early arguments about the “levelling” effect of the internet (a view subject to very early empirical criticism; see, for example: Small, 2008) can now better be understood as generating matching compensatory costs: as data abundance has increased, scarcity has shifted from production to consumption. Further, in political terms, free entry to the internet’s various public spheres is not cost-free for those subaltern populations for whom their participation is intensely contested (for example: trolling youth gun regulation activists after the Parkland shooting (Hartounian, 2018) or focused racial invective aimed at high-profile women of color (Dhroodia, 2017)).⁴

The relationship between different media forms and democratic participation has a long history of study and speculation. Recently, with regards to younger people, Xenos, et al. (2014) have argued strongly for a positive relationship between young people’s time spent on social media and political participation. Based on a survey of youngish people (16-29)⁵ in the US, UK and Australia⁶ they argued that social media was positively related to increased political participation, and produced a good regression analysis of survey data to support this argument. This data also, however, equally-strongly correlated participation with internal political efficacy for individual political activity⁷, presenting the real possibility (as the authors identify) that this might be epiphenomenal in nature.⁸ Significantly, the same volume includes a longitudinal analysis of internet use that concludes that “...facilities on the internet often described as ‘social’ media offer environments which mainly draw young people’s attention away from common concerns” (Ekstrom, et al. 2014:54). Thus, the actual relationship remains open for investigation.

MOBILISATION POLITICS

That the internet plays a role in the political practices of young people is uncontestable, just as low-cost printing played an important role in youth politics of the 1960s and 70s. In thinking about social media (commonly defined in terms of use cases)⁹ it is important to consider the

³ And implicitly informed by resource mobilisation theories of political agency.

⁴ The negative iteration of “gatewatching” behaviours that capture positive participation in institutional media production (see Bruns, 2005).

⁵ As many authors note, youth is both a biological and social category. The tendency to towards longer age ranges in some analysis may accurately reflect the extended infantilisation of post-war generations. Considerable discussion is possible here about the social implications on efficacy of this social constructivism.

⁶ Drawn from online panels.

⁷ Slightly lower, but still important, for group political activity.

⁸ This is not an uncommon difficulty, Ekstrom, et al in the same volume find a relationship between political news consumption and political socialisation, identifying this as related to “self-transcendent values” (2014:54).

⁹ Explicitly or implicitly. This is a feature of visibility bias and the problem in studying hidden affordances like the underlying sorting algorithms of social media platforms. This can present two biases: One, the tendency to naturalise these systems and assume that user communities reflect the exterior world, or; Two, the tendency to

political implications of its underlying technological and intuitional characteristics (Howard and Parks, 2012). While the latter is discussed below, social media is largely only possible because of its reliance on large database systems that afford horizontal visibility among peer groups. Thus, it is unsurprising that social media's been politically useful in the processes of political mobilization, as the work of groups like GetUp and others demonstrate (see: Vromen, 2017).¹⁰

Considerable recent attention has been paid to youth mobilisations around climate issues, particularly the role of young people as leadership figures (i.e. Greta Thunberg) and peer mobilisations using new media (for a discussion, see Collin and McCormack, 2019). However, until end-to-end case research is conducted, caution needs to be taken in ascribing causation. Survivor bias is a considerable problem in this area. The view that recent youth protests are cumulative of their increased capacity through social media is one explanation that places new media in a key role, but remains a largely correlative explanation. Many of these examples are embedded in established social movement industries, and not outside the scale of mobilization seen in pre-internet youth-led movements. An alternative perspective is that we can see this as part of the normal periodical "cycle of contention" of post-war youth mobilisations that we have seen since the 1950s. History might inform this. Beyer (2014) in looking at non-commercial social media sites like The Pirate Bay points to the importance of abeyance-type processes that pre-date new media. Thus, we could argue that established collective action theory might be hierarchically higher than social media specific theorizing in explaining case examples (e.g. a more social deterministic focus).

Irregardless of this speculation, Collin (2015) has been correct to point out that claims about youth disengagement as exaggerated. Pointing to volunteering¹¹ and social movement participation rates as examples of where "formal" institutional participation rates do not represent the level of social engagement young people exhibit. This reflects an interest in the activities of "everyday makers" among older cohorts (Bang and Sørensen, 1999); a correction of the "democratic decline" literature by expanding what political participation looks like, but also recognizing a shift towards great informality in participation in the public sphere.

Collin's identification of youth participation in movement politics provides further evidence of what Bennett (2008:9) identified as "social movement citizenship": an emphasis on issues, informality, and expressive behavior within the "rights-centric" (versus dutiful/republican) model of citizenship.¹² While participation in these types of activities is encouraging and important, a decline in interest in more conventional models of government presents problems in realising political wins, or accepting political compromises. Overall, social movement

ascribe magical powers to the systems under discussion – for example, accepting at face value claims by companies like Cambridge Analytica that they were able to use Facebook data to deep read users psychology (see, for example: Andrews, 2018).

¹⁰ Though, as Gonzalez Vaillant, et al (2015) have found, there is uncertainty in the nature of mobilisations with a tendency for unpredictable results and growth rates.

¹¹ New media association with increased volunteering and other non-traditional forms of participation is interesting, however longitudinal data in Australia is scarce and unreliable (Walsh and Black, 2015) and there is evidence that increased volunteering rates pre-date widespread internet adoption in other nations and may be associated with motivations like experience gathering to enhance personal employability / college entry (see, for example Jones (2000) in the US context).

¹² The paper may seem disparaging of social movement citizenship, but this is not the case. Rights-protection/expansion is an important political activity and works at fundamental/epistemological political levels. Proponents of dutiful citizenship have, in my opinion – consciously or not – internalised reactionary opinions that expressive/rights-centric citizenships practices are "less than" republican models that has often come to be little more than a euphemism for Cameralism.

citizenship / everyday making presents a number of limitations to democratic practice and the way we think about it analytically: a tendency to adhocacy¹³, paradoxical disconnection¹⁴, and rapid demobilization¹⁵.

SOCIAL MEDIA, PARTICIPATION, AND PANOPTICISM

To understand the relationship between social media and democratic practice we need to determine what type of practice space social media affords. “Practice space” is used deliberately here over the more popular “public sphere” due to misapplication of this concept to the new media environment¹⁶, but also the need to focus on democratic practice as performative and not simply “academic” in the popular use of the term. Thus, rather than see the commercial social media platforms as public spheres (true sandboxes), we can see them as sites with considerable visible and invisible geographies of power that provide political affordances, but also shape social expectation of social media citizenship (an emerging debate as some platform providers struggle to regulate content on their platforms).

Overall, the significant driver of monistisation of online spaces (combined with the collapse of the conventional advertising economy) has increasingly driven social media into a primary role in surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2018).

From the discursive perspective, the impact of surveillance was demonstrated in Stoycheff’s 2016 study of the effect that social media users’ awareness of surveillance produced more conservative behavior and speech – an effect that increased scholarly and popular discussion will increase in the short term.¹⁷ From a practice perspective, the implications of these “preferencing knowing” machines have considerable implications for human agency.

¹³ First, movement politics tend towards fluid structures which more commonly produce adhocacy. While this is an established advantage of movements, giving them both the flexibility and dynamism, this type of practice may not produce democratic socialization. Adhocacy through decentralized electronic and online methods of collective action tend to situate issues and problems in the context of “unique” or unusual issues that may require perceptual or extra-normal methods of address. As previous noted (Chen, 2013), its possible that these types of organizational forms, based on the language of crisis, place politics into states of exception that are less – not more – likely to consider democratic norms. It will be interesting to see if the current environmental crisis framing of climate movements move in this direction, particularly as the full costs of decarbonization become visible to movement leadership and members.

¹⁴ While rejecting arguments about social media a fundamentally “siloining” (the so-called “filter bubbles” arguments), issue-based politics can disconnect participants from other issue groups. As networked politics, horizontal visibility can be low. One of the difficulties of the study of younger people’s political engagement lies in its comparative “invisibility” within social media that’s not easily observable to wider publics. Indeed, as Schuster (2013) observed, this invisibility can create a “generational divide” within movements: with older activists unaware of the depth of engagement of younger activists. This reinforces findings that social networks may not create social capital as anticipated (Valenzuela, et al. 2009), indeed, there are considerable concerns that high levels of social media consumption may be alienating: creating negative emotional states through exposure to simulacra of others’ “best lives” (Hunt, et al, 2018).

¹⁵ As Uldam and Vestergaard (2015) argue, there is a considerable need to refocus on civic participation beyond movement-based and protest-focused analysis. Image is not action, and considerable over-attention to visible movement action raises questions about the extent to which the transition from expressive politics to agenda building to policy design, implementation, and monitoring occurs.

¹⁶ The attraction of online media theorists to Habermasian deliberation may not have been a good choice of democratic model because of the overemphasis on early parts of the policy process over latter aspects of it. In this I recognise the importance of listening to the “turn” from discursive to new materialism in rebalancing our theory of change (see, for example, Connolly, 2013).

¹⁷ Looking at Xenos, et al. (2014:29-30) analysis again, we can also see how social media use – all other things being equal – was considerably more likely to relate to individual over group political activity.

This observation is made because surveillance capitalism is not incompatible with efficacy and participation. Indeed, the sophistication of this system of preference matching can provide users with an enhanced sense of efficacy in parts of their lives. Where “search” once drove the core economy of the internet and provided efficacy through agency, “sharing” and automagical results systems replace agency with expectation. Efficacy is obtained in these surveillance regimes, but it is not through the type of agency commonly associated with democratic participation, rather a negative-agency: a surrendering to the panoptic view of the system in recognition of its capacity to service the individual within very narrow and uncontested spheres.

Thus it should be noted that evaluating correlations against measures of “using social media” as a single metric are intensely problematic. Thorson (2014:86) has argued that there are considerable differences in the value of new media associated with how the technologies are employed, with “active” (i.e. search over sociability) use correlated with more challenging modes of citizenship (i.e. seeking divergent opinion exposure).

This type of preference servicing/channeling is not simply something we see in corporate media spaces. Through the valorization of corporate modes of production in the political sphere, these types of negative-agency (passive) efficacy systems are proliferating within institutions (public, private, and non-profit), and in the new interest in behavioural and “nudge” economics in the public sector. These projects seek to understand citizen-client-employees, but only to the extent to which that knowledge fulfills institutional objectives. The naturalisation of the technologies underpinning these management systems further erodes the capacity of users to express consent (with legitimacy implications we’ve seen developing in established democracies), and participate in process design (future eroding the capacity for transference of democratic capacity into other areas of life). Socialisation, therefore, must be considered to be a continual, not developmental process.

WHERE FORWARD?

It’s important to learn from the failures of the “electronic democracy” movement of the turn of the century. Attempts to create and propagate participative platforms advocated at this time significantly failed through a combination of low utilisation and limited state interest in cultivating and connecting with them. Even where public management has embraced notions of popular legitimacy – the public value movement – this has not led to an embrace of participative media by public managers. In survey research with devolved public managers, Bolívar (2016:45) found comparatively low interest in the adoption of participative-collaborative “web 2.0” technologies of most high utilization by younger people. This reflects the “audience problem” for young people who do seek expression through these media: who’s listening? The importance of these co-productive spaces lies in their validation of participation. If top-down technology projects have underwhelmed, then bottom-up models may be still available. Coleman (2008:200-2) has highlighted the importance of skilling for “autonomous e-citizenship”, that capacity building and skilling¹⁸ overcomes the problem of bad faith¹⁹ by

¹⁸ Significantly, drawing on Xenos, et al. (2014: 29-30) analysis of younger people’s social media use, we can see that traditional and digitally-focused (vis-à-vis Coleman’s model) civics education was significant in the generation of group over individual political activity.

¹⁹ This is the problem that most civics education is in bad faith. As Bennet observed: most academic and educational representation of democratic practice bears little resemblance to its actual practice (2008:7), precisely because this practice in most established democracies falls far short of the idealistic underlying motivations embedded in most civics instruction. How, for example, can one really exhort the virtues of Australian liberal

allowing young people to develop their own aspirational spaces. This has been demonstrated in applied research in schools (see: Black, 2017).

This model presumes, however, that these skills are produced in a context where their democratic application is explicit, and that these self-actualizing young e-citizens will employ these skills in a frictionless environment that provides them an even playing field. If this was an illusion able to be sustained by Coleman in 2008, a decade later it cannot be. Thus, the corporate-dominated internet has proven Rand wrong: simple heroic individuals cannot find self-actualization in the face of such over-whelming corporate power. The “hidden affordances” of the sub-systems most internet users spend the majority of their time in online (as opposed to the delusion of the internet as a “sandbox”) may be malleable to a literate few, but this presents the prospect of meritocracy, not democracy. Further, social media may provide greater affordances for reactionary and counter-democratic agents (corporations, the state) to limit movement and other political agency (Cammaerts, 2015; Uldam, 2015).

This latter power is contestable. While online activists have attempted to moderate the policies of major internet platform operators, their capacity to act against organisations of this scale and transnational character has been most effective only where similar transnational capacity exists. Thus, while there has been a range of state-level investigations and proposed regulatory interventions in the way platforms operate, the most significant developments have been seen at the level of the European Union. This remains a moving target.

CONCLUSION

This paper has taken a deliberately skeptical approach to the role that social media plays in youth participation. The internet is no longer a land without a history, and optimistic projections that new technological affordances have a deterministic (social or technological) correlation with democratization need to be checked against the visible history of these claims through previous technological iterations, and the wider background context of societies that are more technologically saturated, as well as being less democratic overall. While new media is certainly at the heart of recent youth mobilization politics, it’s not clear this is more than correlative. Younger people are disproportionately institutionally situated in contexts obsessed by the “human capital” developmental school (Becker, 1993) in which citizenship rights are largely held in abeyance, secondary to instrumental aims associated with participation in the private world’s production and consumption.

To avoid falling into the twin traps of bad faith promotion of weak systems or magical thinking about new spaces and places for participation, systematic democratization of spaces and places – both online and off – must be the focus of reform, as participation without democratization is the possible panacea that can consume the efforts of reformers. As the internet splits into three distinct jurisdictions – the surveillance capitalism space that dominates the US-centric internet, the now well-established Chinese authoritarian space, and an emerging European Union regulated internet – new possibilities and natural experiments present themselves for

democracy, when the country is neither democratic (its majoritarianism is high) nor liberal (as a racist settler colonial state that demonstrates this racism through its border policy and ongoing “intervention” in the lives of its indigenous people)? As “telling people to participate in bad institutions is mere propaganda” (Levine, 2006), this is why there’s been a tendency to focus on political spaces that are presented as *tabula rasa*, be this technological spaces over the last two decades, or an emphasis on social movement participation because ever-renewing social movements maintain the appearance of both democratic (because they are inherently participative), and new (because they tend to be constantly renamed).

investigation in the online space. To take advantage of these affordances civics education has demonstrated it can produce positive improvements in rates of participation, but this will need to be met by increased opportunities for democratic agency in our classrooms, workplaces, and the public sphere.

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