POLICY PAPER 04 / 2013

PETER DAHLGREN, LUND UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

DO SOCIAL MEDIA ENHANCE DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION?

THE IMPORTANCE – AND DIFFICULTY – OF BEING "REALISTIC"

Research and debates about the significance and role of social media for democracy – especially in regard to promoting citizens' participation in politics – continues with much intensity. The discussions are often either optimistic or pessimistic in character, and research evidence can seemingly be found for both sides. Other voices assert that we should be dispassionate and realistic in these matters. This text shares that view, but also points out that it is not always easy to be realistic: to understand the impact of social media we must look at them in their social contexts, and this can become complicated. Yet it is our best way forward. This text seeks to shed light on the democratic potential and limitations of social media by taking a contextual perspective. This will include understanding how social media are embedded in our everyday lives, probing the character of mediated political participation, and illuminating some basic technical and social attributes that shape the character of social media.

The role of social media for democracy and participation has become a growing theme within research and public debate, echoing earlier discussions from the mid-1990s when the internet was becoming a mass phenomenon. The discussions in the era of Web 2.0, however, are more complex, since the media landscape has become so much more developed. Also, debates today are fuelled by seemingly competing research findings; these foster both enthusiasm and scepticism, while other voices say we should avoid emotionality and simply be "realistic".

While I fully agree that we should strive to be as realistic as possible, such realism may not always be so simple to attain. This is because social media do not operate in a social vacuum; rather their significance and impact are contextual. While firm conclusions may ultimately elude us, a contextual perspective offers us a much better chance of understanding – realistically – the potentials and limitations of social media, and of using them as a democratic force.

I begin with a quick glimpse at some of the main arguments about social media's role in a democracy facing difficult times. From there I look at social media as part of our everyday lives; this contextual understanding is very important in looking at their political functions. Thereafter I discuss the idea of political participation via the media, as important dimensions of the issue. Finally, I address what I call web logics – the fundamental attributes that shape the character of social media.

EVIDENCE IN DISPUTE

Most observers are in agreement that democracy in Western societies is in dire straits, even if there are differing views on why this is the case and what should be done about it. Clearly the onslaught of neoliberalism and its market motives, together with globalisation and a decline of the relative power of the state, are central to understanding democracy's ills. The corrupting influence of moneyed interests on politics is also a key factor, as are the various (often informal) mechanisms of exclusion that undercut the political efficacy of citizens. Other voices point to rampant individualism and diminished solidarity, or growing social and cultural heterogeneity. National narratives have some variation, while the democratic deficit of the EU is grasped by most citizens in the member states. There is a general consensus that the vitality, perhaps even the very survival, of democracy cannot be taken for granted; ironically, this has particularly been the case since the collapse of communism.

Among the dilemmas facing democracy is the general decline in civic engagement. Party loyalty is declining; voting patterns display declining stability. Citizens demonstrate a growing sense of powerlessness and cynicism. Yet, at the same time, alternative politics, outside the electoral system, is also on the upswing, while protest parties, mainly on the right, are also springing up, these also include ideologically mixed groupings such as the Pirate Party. One must note, however, that the numbers of people involved here are

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG

mostly small compared to the number of citizens who appear to be dropping out of mainstream politics in various ways.

Social media are seemingly all around us, and it is not surprising that some analysts (the enthusiasts) see here some kind of "quick fix" for democracy's difficulties. Sceptics, for their part, contend that social media will not make any real difference, and can in fact even be detrimental for democratic development. Let's look at some of the main arguments.

The enthusiasts celebrate the fact that social media can promote horizontal (civic) communication, putting individuals and groups in touch with each other. Also, the new technologies associated with Web 2.0 are quite inexpensive and easy to use, and this facilitates a good deal of creative involvement. Enthusiasts also note that social media have become a key vehicle for opinion formation via discussions that often link political and personal domains. Politics can easily "break out" on social media, mobilizing engagement, or "go viral". Especially for those involved in alternative politics, social media provide an immeasurable resource; in fact, it is argued that much activity among political activists, social movements, civic alliances, NGOs and other actors would not exist without the help of these media.

Further, social media can provide feelings of competence, such as a sense of empowerment; growing numbers of citizens are even engaging in activities that resemble journalism. Not least, the modes of expression in social media are characterized by diversity and are not locked into a strict rational form. This allows many different voices with different inflections to be heard.

The sceptics counter with the evidence that access to the web, and social media in particular, does not per se lead people to engage in politics; such participation builds on the interplay of many other factors. Moreover, politics tends to come very far down on the list of activities for which people use social media. Indeed, in the web environment, with its intensive competition for attention, people are confronted by seemingly infinite possibilities for involvement with information, consumption, entertainment, sociality, and other experiences, most of which have nothing to do with politics. When online, the role of the citizen can readily switch to that of the consumer.

Further, the sceptics assert that net harassment and bullying are also, regrettably, quite common, and at times lead voices to be silenced. Moreover, in authoritarian regimes, social media can be used for political control; and we have recently become aware of how much even democratic governments use social media for political surveillance.

Such, in bare bones form, are some of the key arguments from the two camps. If we pose the somewhat crude question, "Can social media save democracy?", the simple answer must clearly be "No". Democracy's dilemmas are not about a lack of screens or keyboards. Yet, if we think of how profoundly social media impact on other spheres of social life, it would be odd if it were not making a difference in the realm of politics as well. The first step towards enhancing our realist perspective is to propose that both the enthusiasts and the sceptics in certain ways overstate their cases. Let us probe the issue a bit further.

A DAILY ENVIRONMENT

The web as somewhat of a catch-all term includes not least what we call social media, which is often the most relevant aspect of the web for participation. Moreover, the frequent use of the term social media may draw attention away from the fact that a variety of different technical platforms can be used for different purposes. Thus, we need to be fairly specific when talking about social media and careful about drawing conclusions about one form based on evidence from another.

For example, Facebook offers richer communication possibilities for discussion, than, say, Twitter; while Twitter is more useful for spreading short messages to large numbers of people very quickly, such as when coordinating a large demonstration. YouTube, by contrast, is very functional for, among other things, broadcasting audiovisual documentary material from live political events, while blogs are better for presenting a personal political view. The contexts of use are very important.

Social media have come to constitute an environment where more and more people spend much of their time for an array of purposes, from social interaction with friends to gossip blogging, from searching for music to news, from shopping to finding a partner. Social media have become the taken-for-granted sites in which much of daily life is increasingly embedded. We can and should still distinguish between on- and offline contexts, but our daily lives have become dependent on their entwinement, a feature that of course is important for participation: politics, it would seem, can thus be more readily accessed through social media.

Such media also deepen the patterns of networking as a form of social organization. Networks are important because they facilitate horizontal communication: people and organizations can directly link up with each other for purposes of sharing information, for providing mutual support, organising, mobilising, or solidifying collective identities. They offer a communication structure well suited for non-hierarchical democratic social relations. Networks are constantly evolving in response to internal and external impacts, and adapting as circumstances change; they are never fully fixed. This adaptability is of course also significant for engagement in the life of democracy.

Finally, the mediated terrain of social life can be understood as constantly in flux, with a steady flow of novelty in terms of content and forms of expression. To engage daily with this intensively dynamic milieu is to adapt oneself to a culture of incessant change – even if users of course develop their own stabilizing routines in dealing with the web. Social media often involve a dramatic expansion of people's personal frames of reference; this can be enriching, but also can involve stress in keeping up with it all – also known as FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out). In short, the entwinement of social media with the settings of everyday life is both a strength and a distraction.

MEDIATED PARTICIPATION
AND ITS DYNAMICS

While it may be more difficult these days to define "politics" with great certainty, given the many new forms that it is taking – including personal-, single issue-, life-, lifestyle-, cultural-, identity politics, and so on – at some point political participation must touch base with power relations. The power dimension is a part of all social relations, at the microlevel of our everyday lives as well as at the larger, structural levels of society. It is not that power relations can or should be eliminated, but rather that perceived imbalances or ille-

gitimate forms of power can be challenged. This is a major virtue of democracy: that we can do so under civilized forms, without violence.

Thus, political participation is more than merely media access or communicative interaction; these are often necessary, but never sufficient for genuine politics. Politics always involves some degree of contestation – struggle – in the social world. It can therefore be useful to keep in mind the distinction between participation *in* the media and participation *via* the media. To participate *in* the media may involve political conflict – for example struggles over editorial control of a discussion forum. Most often, however, it has to do with (affective) engagement in the symbolic world of the media themselves, with no practical consequence for the social world beyond (with the possible exception of some kind of ideological reinforcement).

Participation *via* the media, on the other hand, takes us into social domains beyond the media. Participation in these domains is facilitated by the media, but the focus of engagement lies with the contexts and issues that media connect us to. Increasingly our relation to the social takes this mediated route – and hence the importance of media, social media as well as other forms. And here we encounter more contextual issues: as political life becomes increasingly mediated, we need to be aware of the media contexts that influence the nature of participation. In regard to social media, this leads us to consider briefly what we could call "web logics".

WEB LOGICS
The prevailing structures of economic and political power in society tend to align themselves on the web as well, and are intertwined with the main logics that define the web and the dynamics of social media. We can specify three major sets of web logics: first, there are the *technical* ones that derive from the basic architecture and infrastructure of the web. These are manifested in the web's general network structure, with its links, as well as in the specific technological affordances of given tools and platforms. Second, there are the *political-economic* logics; these direct our attention to concentration and privatization of ownership and the commodification of value of and on the web. Third, there are *social* logics; these are basically socio-cultural in character, and embedded in user practices: digital competencies, patterns of use, and the dynamics of network social relations.

The interplay between technical, political-economic, and social logics offers a general approach for highlighting contextual features of social media. These logics can evolve as circumstances and usage change, but at any given moment serve as significant parameters that guide web use. Also, they operate in complex relations which can reinforce or contradict each other, although political-economic dynamics tend to dominate; their hegemonic position, expressed not least via regulatory mechanisms and commercial imperatives, of course, relates to the hegemonic position of neoliberalism more generally.

Beginning with the technical logics, we can note the role of Google in influencing how the web functions; the significance of its technical logics can hardly be exaggerated. This behemoth has become the largest holder of information in world history, both public and private, shaping not only how we search for information, but also what information is available, how we organize, store, and use it. In many ways, it is an utterly astounding development and has become a com-

pletely decisive feature of the net's architecture. Google has also become a verb.

The company has grown into an enormous concentration of power that is largely unaccountable, hidden behind the cheery corporate motto "Don't be evil" and built on the considerable trust that it has managed to generate. But increasingly, very serious questions are being raised about copyright and privacy, about how Google is using its information, about Google's own agenda in striving to organise knowledge on a global scale, and about its role in democracy. All this is not to detract from its truly impressive accomplishments; rather, the issue is that the position it has attained, and the activities it pursues (which are quite logical given its position), raise questions about information, democracy, accountability, and power in regard to the web.

Google engages in surveillance and privacy intrusion of citizens in the gathering of consumer-related data, while at the same time denying transparency in regard to, for example, its PageRank algorithm and Google Scholar search process. With its complex system for ranking search results, it matches advertisements to search parameters, gathers private, sellable databases, and auctions them to the highest bidder, often the new kinds of high-tech marketing and advertising firms. They develop individual and household profiling, and operate to a great extent through social media.

We all strew personal electronic traces around us daily; these are gathered up, stored, sold, and used for commercial purposes by a variety of actors, not just Google. This sale of personal information is done without our formal consent, but often via discrete, friendly strategies. And if we refuse, we effectively cut ourselves off from the major utilities of the web. All participation on the net, even the most radical political kind, feeds data into the commercial system that is its infrastructure. The technical logics merge with the political-economic ones.

Furthermore, with the search logic built on personal profiling, the answers that two people will receive based on the same search words may well differ significantly. This can wreak havoc with the whole concept of public knowledge: members of insular groups can find their biases reinforced instead of challenged by this filtering process. In the long-run this could potentially jeopardise the democratic culture of debate between differing points of view.

One can of course respond that this is merely a minor irritation; we can put up with silly commercial pop-ups and even the gathering of our commercial data if that is the price we have to pay to use the web and social media. However, with only a slight change in circumstances, such data can have consequences for our political freedom. The recent revelations about US global espionage that is based partly on cooperation with social media providers underscores the point.

While we cooperate indirectly, or de facto, with Google in providing personal information; when it comes to Facebook (now with about one billion users worldwide) we are very active in feeding personal data into the system, and we should be all the more concerned about the kinds of information we are making available about ourselves, and to whom. Social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have become important channels of political communication as well as outlets and sources for journalism. They are a major part of the public sphere of political discussion; they are used for both parliamentarian and alternative politics,

blending the political and the social with the personal, as well as civil society with consumption and pleasure.

These social media sites are also major suppliers of what is called big data, which refers to the massive amounts of mainly personal data that is routinely collected on the activities and transactions of web users. As a consequence, social media have become the sites of massive marketing efforts. Clicking the Like-button sends signals to networks where like-mindedness pre-structures considerable trust, and where this credibility becomes translated into promotional assets. The political-economic logic is ironclad.

As with Google, the data gathered is for commercial purposes, but again, changing social contexts can generate new uses and meanings of personal information. With Facebook, the spill-over from private to public is much easier (many examples are now part of urban folklore), resulting in embarrassment, entanglements, loss of employment, and/or defamation. Data theft is also easier, and has been accomplished a number of times; these digital storage systems are simply not fail-safe. Thus, to participate in Facebook and similar social media is to expose oneself to surveillance and to have one's privacy put at risk.

The social logics may be less easy to clearly identify, but they are nonetheless operative. In Facebook's role as a site for political discussion, the Like-button takes on significance. While it is only human to be drawn to people who are like oneself and think in the same way, this is not necessarily a healthy pattern for democracy or political participation. One clicks to befriend people and ideas who are "like" oneself, generating and cementing networks of like-mindedness (there is no Dislike-button).

A further social logic that seems to be emerging and which is worrisome in regard to participation and the culture of democracy, is a form of personalised visibility and self-promotion. When younger people (especially) turn to politics, it seems that the patterns of digital social interaction increasingly carry over into the political. Researchers find that while digitally enabled citizens may be skilled in many ways, they are also generally removed from the civic habits of the past. For example, it is not so obvious among citizens of some democracies that demonstrations or other forms of assembly are necessarily an appealing or effective form of political practice. The tendency to just stay in front of the screen can

only undercut the long-term political impact of participation; this is often called "slacktivism" – the comfortable media-centred mode of political engagement where feeling good takes priority over political commitment.

It may well be that the online setting, with its powerful technical affordances, discourages engagement beyond itself: social, technical and political-economic logics thus interplay to prioritise participation *in* the media and constrain the significance of participation *via* the media. While such a retreat into an environment that many people feel that they have more control over is understandable, it introduces a historically new – and troubling – kind of democratic participatory mode.

RECLAIMING REALISM

The shifting, overlapping, and at times contradictory contexts of social media use, highlighted especially by the logics of the web themselves, render the question of social media's significance for participation in democracy a rather complicated issue. We cannot provide a simple, unequivocal answer. Rather, we have to look at concrete societal contexts, with their political situations, their cultural currents, and not least, media attributes, to glean some sense of what is going on in any particular case.

From there we can begin to draw some generalisations, albeit cautiously. The enthusiasts and the sceptics have staked out their horizons; we can make use of them, but only by careful contextualization can we begin to piece together realistic perspectives of social media's democratic contributions. Democracy will not be saved by media technologies; social media can make an important difference in this regard, but they can also function to exacerbate democracy's difficulties. Ultimately only citizens can revitalise and extend democracy; that is our only realistic option.

Peter Dahlgren is professor emeritus at the Department of Communication and Media, Lund University, Sweden. His work focuses on media and democracy, with a special focus on the web and political participation. Active in international academic networks, he has also been a visiting scholar at several universities. His recent publications include *The Political Web* (Palgrave 2013), *Media and Political Engagement* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), and the co-edited volume *Young People, ICTs and Democracy* (Nordicom, 2010).