

Caught in the Web: The Impact of New Communication Technology on Political Participation

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How are new communication technologies reshaping political participation today? Popular debate surrounding this topic has been largely polarised: advances in online technology are seen as either a revolutionary and democratizing force or are dismissed as having little impact on current political power structures. Alec Ross, former Senior Advisor for Innovation to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, characterises one side of the argument and is a long-time public advocate of the revolutionary force of new social networking innovations. He argues that the ability for individuals to utilise these new technologies at little to no cost allows them to challenge the hierarchical authority structures that dominate the political system [1]. Early research into the democratising effect of the Internet supported this notion [2], and high profile cases such as the 'Arab Spring' and the so-called 'Twitter Revolution' in Moldova added to the optimism surrounding this emerging phenomenon [3].

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Yet others have pushed back against this narrative. Malcolm Gladwell, for instance, makes the case that these changes do not challenge the fundamentals of political participation and social mobilisation; although they may alter superficial aspects of these processes, in important ways politics today remains 'business as usual'



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[4]. His argument fits well with classic models in social movement theory, which posit that social movements have high barriers to participation and therefore rely upon strong identity ties and well-developed organisational structures in order to overcome such barriers; new media, by contrast, is built around weak ties with little to no central organising capacity, and is therefore no replacement for traditional forms of social mobilisation [5]. Citing the same 'Twitter Revolution', he points out that more recent research indicates that Twitter actually had very little impact domestically, as very few Twitter accounts actually existed in Moldova at the time. Instead, it was common identity and strong organizational capacity that managed to galvanize enough support for the movement, offering credence to the argument that these new technologies have yet to do more than scratch the surface of what really influences political mobilization.

Beyond the Debate

Recent, more in-depth research into the relationship between emerging communication technology and political activity unsurprisingly reveals a more nuanced landscape. Rather than new

communication tools being viewed as either a panacea or irrelevant, researchers find that their political salience often depends upon the particular type of political mobilization under consideration. Having a clearer understanding of these different typologies and the way in which new communication technologies impact them is crucial for theorists, political actors, and citizens alike.

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For example, many of the sceptics of social media's revolutionary role have focused on its political effect in terms of media consumption and online activity, refuting early claims that such technology would lead to media diversification and an increase in deliberative democracy on blogs and chat rooms [9]. Studies in this area suggest that proliferation of media choices coupled with the flexibility of on-demand viewing has lead to audience fragmentation, whereby those who are not politically inclined can now avoid political messaging altogether, while individuals with a strong civic attachment can access information tailored specifically to them [10]. This leads to both increased political disengagement and intensified partisanship. In addition, although the Internet does provide the opportunity for anyone to author their own political views, this research finds that meaningful political voice online remains concentrated amongst an elite circle, and that many of the traditional power relations that characterised 'old' media have simply been recreated in this new medium [11]. Finally, even if such power dynamics have undergone a shift, it is far from certain that it has been a democratic one. Instead, corporations such as Facebook and Google

have concentrated the online market to an unprecedented degree, and there is a very real concern about the degree of control that they now have over the type of information we receive and the way in which we receive it [8].

The positive political ramifications of new communication technology, however, may be more prominent in other types of political activity. Research into a number of different social movements, including Occupy Wall Street [7], and the 2007 Anti-War Protest in Washington D.C. [9] indicates that the utilisation of social media greatly decreased the cost in both time and money associated with mobilisation, decreasing the barriers to entry and leading to mobilisation on a massive scale. More importantly, the internet offers the opportunity for new *types* of social mobilisation, some of which now occurs almost exclusively online; examples include 'strategic voter pairing' which emerged as early as the 2000 American presidential election [9], online petition websites such as MoveOn.org, and the rapid online mobilisation of individuals to oppose new 'Net Neutrality' laws in the United States (which led to Google's petition alone receiving 7 million signatures) [12]. In these instances, more than simply leveraging the Internet to improve upon past strategies, individuals and groups are now designing strategies specifically around these new technologies.

Expanding Theory

This research on ease of online mobilisation clearly challenges one of the fundamental tenets of social movement theory outlined above: that there necessarily exists a large barrier to participation in social movements. By assuming high barriers to individual participation, the theory then posits that both a strong collective identity and a well-resourced organisation are strictly necessary for successful political mobilisation. Yet much of this online

activism has been conducted by lay-individuals acting autonomously, bringing together hundreds of thousands of diverse people with little in common beyond the cause they were supporting [9]. The identification of these new dynamics have led to an emerging consensus amongst political communications researchers that there is a growing need for a re-evaluation of current theories: new technologies should be put at the centre of analysis, and components previously thought to be constants, such as high participation costs, should now be viewed as variable. Given the rapid speed of technological progress, moreover, any conclusions drawn should not necessarily be seen as generalisable.

Policy Implications

Adjusting this understanding has implications for organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, when determining policies for political engagement and mobilisation. Given increased audience fragmentation, organisations hoping to target those who are not already politically engaged need to develop unique ways of reaching them through non-traditional means, rather than simply relying on television, radio, and mainstream Internet tools such as campaign websites. Moreover, political groups need to recognise that traditional forms of mobilisation requiring a strong organisational centre and hierarchical design may vary in efficacy in comparison to the new tools available depending on the type of political activity needed and the social cohesion of their constituents. In addition, they need to focus on developing an online presence in line with these new norms, fostering personalisation, participation, and self-expression. Given the varied results of online political mobilization based on both the medium employed and the type of mobilization sought, organizations should seek to tailor the tool used to both the desired outcome and community to be targeted. Leveraging the benefits that new

communication technology affords, while recognising the challenges it poses, will help ensure that its full political potential is realised.

About the Author



Declan is an MPhil student at the Centre for Development Studies at Cambridge University. His research spans a number of interrelated subjects, including social movement theory, human rights, and the effect of land reform and liberalization on ethnic minorities' livelihoods. Prior to joining the Centre here at Cambridge, Declan spent a year working with a number of local Burmese human rights organisations on issues related to political prisoners and ethnic minorities in Burma/Myanmar. He graduated in 2013 with a BA in Political Science from McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

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