Exploring the Implications of Social Media and Web 2.0 on Democracy:
A Comprehensive Analysis

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Abstract

This article analyzes the profound impact of Web 2.0 technologies and social media platforms on democratic processes. By exploring the effects of new internet communication methods, it delves into the ongoing debates surrounding their implications. The role of social media in political communication is critically examined, shedding light on the key principles and debates shaping this domain. Additionally, the article explores the redefinition of policies towards personalized politics in response to the transformative power of social media. Furthermore, the article investigates the potential influences of social media on political participation, unveiling a multifaceted landscape. It addresses the intricate relationship between social media and political communication, delves into the quality of discourse facilitated by these platforms, and explores the impact on political activism. Moreover, it examines the emergence of political consumerism and its interplay with social media, along with the effects on elected representatives and the representation they provide. Lastly, it explores the implications of social media on public opinion and political actions. By providing a comprehensive summary of diverse perspectives on the role of social media, this article contributes to the broader understanding of its intricate relationship with democracy. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of comprehending the complex dynamics between technology, politics, and society in the context of Web 2.0 and social media. Recognizing the threats and promises posed by these platforms is crucial for effectively navigating the democratic challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media, e-Democracy, Web 2.0, Political Communication, Digital Age

1. Introduction

1.1 Discussions on the Effects of New Internet Communication Methods

The debate surrounding the democratic and political effects of new internet communication methods has been characterized by a dual polarization of high expectations and optimism on one side, and pessimistic expectations of detrimental effects on democratic structures and processes on the other. This discursive feature also applies to discussions concerning the latest form of internet communication, which refers to the use of social media by politicians. Specifically, social media platforms have garnered increasing attention from scholars and politicians due to their

significance in election campaigns and referendums, notably exemplified by the 2016 Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential elections (Schill & Hendricks, 2018)[19].

The issue of the influence and importance of social media in political communication and democracy is driven by various phenomena. Firstly, social media represents the newest wave of socio-technical innovation in internet-based communication, providing new opportunities for user interaction (Boulianne, 2015)[20]. Secondly, social media platforms attract an extraordinarily large user base. The social networking site Facebook alone has over one billion users worldwide, while platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, Twitter, and Instagram are among the most recognizable globally. Thirdly, numerous political events involving social media have a high interest in political interactions and the use of social media for political purposes.

Similar to previous media innovations, the rise of social media sparked hopes for democratic renewal. Particularly, the collaborative qualities of many Web 2.0 applications fostered debates regarding the transformative and democratic potential of new media. As expected, early discussions on the influence of social media on democratic politics divided into enthusiastic and pessimistic camps, echoing the utopian expectations surrounding the role of the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, at present, disagreements over the role of social media in the political sphere appear to be more pronounced compared to most other fields of internet research. Theoretical and conceptual contributions, along with empirical investigations, often generate contradictory ideas and reasoning approaches, making it challenging to find common ground in this domain. Nevertheless, both pessimistic and optimistic approaches find support and arguments (Skoric et al., 2016) [21]. One reason for this deep disagreement within academic literature might be the fact that discussions surrounding the role of social media in democratic politics are facing higher levels of complexity compared to debates in the 1990s. Media spaces have become much more advanced, new media is increasingly intertwined with traditional mass media, deeply embedded in everyday practices, making it harder for analysts to avoid the influences and consequences they bring.

In fact, social media has fundamentally transformed how people use the internet, capitalizing on new opportunities for connection, interaction, and information exchange. Compared to this, social media enables the establishment and maintenance of social networks and direct connections online. The structural characteristics of the new internet ecology facilitate various forms of content production, co-creation of ideas, discussions, and new organizational forms for the internet network (Bennett, 2008) [22]. In terms of information exchange and political debate, the importance of personal connections, a key characteristic of social media, poses significant challenges in accepting shared information. Information and news received from someone the user knows are more likely to be accepted and trusted compared to information from other unfamiliar sources (Carty, 2015) [23].

While the removal of these usual limitations may have empowering effects for citizens, particularly for underrepresented groups, the informational and participatory contributions of social media users can also be manipulated. Bradshaw and Howard (2017) illustrate how governments and government-sponsored groups worldwide actively engage in influencing information exchange and debates on social media, employing a wide range of tactics, from content generation and the creation of fake user accounts to various forms of media propaganda. [24]

1.2 Key Principles in the Debate on the Role of Social Media in Political Communication

The interest in social media and their potential impact on political communication and democracy must be understood within the broader context of discussions on liberal democracy and what many consider to be in a deep crisis. Contemporary challenges faced by democracies include citizen and political disengagement, declining party loyalty and voter turnout, rising cynicism, political inefficiency, and the apparent growth of illiberal and antidemocratic tendencies.

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[19] Schill, D. & Hendricks, J. A. (Eds.) (2018). The presidency and social media: Discourse, disruption, and digital democracy in the 2016 presidential election, New York.

[20] Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: a meta-analysis of current research. Information Communication and Society, 18(5), 524–538.

[21] Skoric, M. M., Zhu, Q., Goh, D., & Pang, N. (2016). Social media and citizen engagement: A metaanalytic review. New Media and Society, 18(9), 1817–1839.

[22] Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth (pp. 1–24). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[23] Carty, V. (2015). Social movements and new technology. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

[24] Bradshaw, S. & Howard, P. N. (2017). Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation. Oxford Internet Institute, Working paper no. 2017.12, Oxford.

Simultaneously, new alternative forms of political engagement outside official representative institutions, often labeled as alternative politics, seem to be emerging.

In contrast to this perspective, many argue that social media have the potential to remedy democratic "ailments," reinvigorate citizen participation in politics, and contribute to new forms of democratic organization. These media spaces primarily rely on the specific features and characteristics of social media. Most notably, social media are recognized for their ability to facilitate horizontal communication, making it easier for individuals and groups to connect online, support diversity, and provide spaces for independent opinions on state institutions. Loader and Mercea identified further influences of social media on political communication and democratic politics, including the power of collaboration and information sharing, the blurring boundaries between mainstream news and social media, as major media corporations increasingly rely on political blogs and user-generated information (Jenkins, 2006) [25].

Political participation is the result of complex interactions among various factors, where "digital media access" is just one of them. Moreover, from experience, it is evident that political activities are significantly less frequent compared to dominant activities targeting society, entertainment, and consumption. Furthermore, increasing empirical evidence highlights the detrimental effects of social media use on democratic processes. These include accusations of social media's contribution to the increasing pollution of the information ecosystem with fake news, hate speech, aggressive propaganda, as well as accusations of creating filter bubbles and echo chambers that threaten public discourse and facilitate authoritarian and antidemocratic forms.

2. Redefining policies towards personalized politics

Several scholars argue that the traditional definition of political needs should be expanded to encompass more than just rational debates (understood as the opposite of influence and emotion) (Caldon, 2016) [26]. Considering new mediated discussions and visible forms of belonging on social media, some propose the integration of non-rational dimensions into contemporary political narratives. In her book "Affective Publics," Papacharissi (2015) [27] argues that the dominant conception of politics is outdated and should be further developed to incorporate affective dimensions such as personal emotions, feelings, storytelling, and the like, which are becoming increasingly significant in political discourse. Beyer (2014) shares this fundamental view and argues that our understanding of politics in virtual spaces is transforming as digital media becomes part of everyday life for everyone.

As the boundaries between online and offline, public and private become blurred, the authors argue that anonymous, fragmented, and often ambiguous associations on social media are likely to influence the political sphere. Banaji and Buckingham (2013) also contribute to a redefinition of the concept of politics and citizenship. Similar to Papacharissi, they observe familiar cultural patterns that are currently not part of regular political discussions, such as emotions, pleasure, or potential elements of new forms of cultural citizenship. [28] In this regard, Dahlgren (2013:) takes a more pragmatic approach, yet follows a similar line of reasoning, stating that the electorate in politics has become more complex, encompassing many new representations that involve personal issues, lifestyles, culture, identity, and more.

Certainly, these mainly theoretical reflections do not yet provide answers to the question of whether and to what extent claims about the emergence of "personalized politics" are becoming apparent. However, the discussion allows for more open and analytical research on new models of political communication that go beyond rational debates. These new models of social media use for political purposes can be considered aspects of politics. Regardless of their stability, the risks associated with the deterioration of rational discourse are increasingly evident in contemporary politics, ranging from the erosion of users' abilities to assess information validity, echo chambers, manipulative campaigns, pervasive and authoritarian rhetoric, to extremism and the politics of fame.

3. Social Media and their Potential Influences on Political Participation

This section discusses the effects that characterize the expanded array of communicative actions made available through social media and their relevance to different aspects of political participation. As is well known, a fundamental prerequisite for any form of active political engagement is access to and consumption of relevant political information. It is argued that social media have a high potential for altering both the traditional models of information dissemination and their

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[25] *Jenkins, H. (2006). Convergence culture. Where old and new media collide. New York: New York University Press.*

[26] *Caldon, P. (2016). Digital publics: Re-defining "the civic' and re-locating "the political'. New Media and Society, 18(9), 2133–2138.*

[27] *Papacharissi, Z. (2015). Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*

[28] *Banaji, S., & Buckingham, D. (2013). The civic web: Young people, the internet, and civic participation. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.*

reproduction.

With the advent of social media, the number of spaces for online discussions has significantly expanded. The characteristics, meaning, and effects of these ever-expanding virtual spaces in political communication are subject to much debate. Are these discussion spaces, often labeled as micropublics, spreading over the real world of politics? Some authors question the political significance of communities that occupy social media platforms. Imhof distinguishes between referential communication, which is oriented towards groups within the context of social media, and non-personal communication, which constitutes the public sphere. [29]

Online communities are characterized by the reproduction of emotional bonds, in-group and out-group differentiation, and shared norms (Gebhardt, 2010: 327.) [30] As communication patterns tend to reinforce shared perspectives on life and moral beliefs, online communities often tend to be predominantly homogeneous. These social processes can be reinforced by the effects of search engines and similar algorithms employed by Facebook, which rely on users' past activities or searches, systematically offering them more of the "same" (Hong & Nadler, 2015: 104) [31]. From this perspective, communication models in social media currently fall far short of creating a participatory culture worldwide.

4. Social Media and Political Communication

It is observed that at least theoretically, social media offer many opportunities for a more informed public, thus increasing the diversity of sources and perspectives (Chen, 2013). However, Chen notes that relevant information, which actually triggers political activity, is more often provided by existing, established, and more stable groups and organizations. [32] The scholarly literature suggests that through social media platforms such as Facebook, users are inadvertently exposed to news they are not actively seeking, which can have mobilizing effects as these news are filtered through the personal networks users have within online communities.

5. Social Media and the Quality of Discourse

In addition to the unresolved issue of whether and how social media influence mobilization and participation in terms of quantity, studies also reflect on the quality of communication exchanges in these online environments. Overall, the scholarly literature tends to present critical perspectives. Kies analyzed a wide range of online political forums, applying an index that assesses the quality of discourse based on several criteria, leading to more differentiated conclusions. However, using an adapted version of this index to compare the quality of discussions in internet forums in 2003 and 2012, Kersting (2017) highlighted existing problems in the discourse, such as the prevalence of monologues over dialogues, the lack of reflective discussion and mutual respect between parties, and even a decline in the quality of discourse over time.[33]

Empirical research has shown that political blogs tend to be opinion-based, weak in terms of fact representation, and often express radical positions. Jericho (2012), focusing on the quality of dialogue on Twitter, drew skeptical conclusions about this platform functioning as a debate forum. He observed that political tweets are dominated by "twitspits," where political adversaries engage in political confrontation but not genuine dialogue. [34]

Despite the expectation to increase diversity in public debates, political blogs tend to respond to the topics and stories presented by mainstream media. Along this line of reasoning, some authors also observe the shrinking of blogs, reducing the potential for more diversity in perspectives and opinions. This process is thought to be driven by two main developments. Since the early 2000s, blogs have progressively transformed into so-called "walled gardens" such as

[29] *Imhof, K. (2015). Demokratisierung durch social media? In K. Imhof, R. DeBlum, H. Bonfadelli, O. Jarren, & V. Wyss (Eds.), Mediensymposium 2012 (pp. 15–26). Wiesbaden.*

[30] *Gebhardt, W. (2010). "We are different!" Zur Soziologie jugendlicher Vergemeinschaftung. In A. Honer, M. Meuser, M. Pfadenhauer, & R. Hitzler (Eds.), Fragile Sozialität: Inszenierungen, Sinnwelten, Existenzbastler (pp. 327–339). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissensschaften.*

[31] *Hong, S., & Nadler, D. (2015). The unheavenly chorus: Political voices of organized interests on social media. Policy and Internet, 8(1), 91–106.*

[32] *Chen, P. J. (2013). Australian politics in a digital age. Canberra: ANU E Press.*

[33] *Kersting, N. (2013). Online participation: from "invited' to "invented' spaces. International Journal of Electronic Governance, 6(4), 270–280.*

[34] *Jericho, G. (2012). The rise of the fifth estate: Social media and blogging in Australian politics. Melbourne: Scribe Publications.*

Facebook. Additionally, political blogs run by ambitious journalists are increasingly linking and collaborating with major media corporations as part of their social media strategies, creating interconnected structures (Davis, 2012)[35].

Other authors argue that the wide range of possibilities to access information through the internet, particularly social media, has encouraged content creators to target diverse, politically uninformed audiences, increasing the chances of spreading disinformation.

6. Political Activism and Social Media

Considering the decline in traditional political participation in political parties and interest groups such as labor unions, social media is often seen as a way to facilitate alternative pathways of participation. These have facilitating characteristics, such as minimal access barriers and low costs. In fact, Chen (2013) observes that internet-based social movements present online activism as an alternative to traditional party membership and forms of political participation. However, these forms of internet activism are debated in terms of their political impact. The literature is skeptical of internet activism formats that do not surpass the "comfortable" way of engaging in political issues that media provides, where political engagement remains mostly impossible (Dahlgren, 2013)[36]. Others also question the depth of "traditionalism" or "media innovation," defined as a "disconnect between the political expression of social media and the political interests and commitments of these users".

7. Political Consumerism

A variant of political participation that is receiving increasing attention is political consumerism. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2013) attempt to address the question of whether social media users are more likely to engage in political consumerism compared to those who are not active on social networking sites. While this expectation is generally supported by the analyzed data, the authors raise the interesting question of whether political consumerism is truly political. Considering the characteristics of political consumerism as a form of lifestyle choice and a form of civic interaction, which is subject to distribution and collective discussion, Gil de Zúñiga and others have proposed labeling this type of citizen engagement as civic consumerism.[37] In this perspective, the characteristics of political consumerism as a lifestyle choice and a form of civic interaction, which is subject to distribution and collective discussion, can explain the positive relationship between social media use and ethical and conscious consumption.

8. Social Media and Elected Representatives

Social media provide the opportunity for politicians and legislators to engage in direct exchange and dialogue with citizens. Being independent of the power held by traditional media, politicians can send their messages to anyone interested in receiving them, and recipients have the choice to respond and comment (Ross & Bürger, 2014)[38]. Several studies have examined the use of social media by parliamentarians and political parties, reaching interesting findings. Jackson and Lilleker show that most political parties utilize the interactive features of social media, primarily using one-way flows for information dissemination. Other research identifies a tendency among political organizations to control communication activity. Regarding parliamentarians, analyses by Ross, Bürger and Williamson indicate that the majority of politicians use digital media more as a tool for information dissemination than as a means to genuinely engage and communicate with people.[39]

[35] *Davis, R. (2012). Interplay: Political blogging and journalism. In R. L. Fox & J. M. Ramos (Eds.), iPolitics: Citizens, elections, and governing in the new media era. New York: Cambridge University Press.*

[36] *Dahlgren, P. (2013). Do social media enhance democratic participation? The importance-and difficulty-of being "realistic". Policy Paper 04/2013, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Berlin.*

[37] *Gil de Zúñiga, H. G., Copeland, L., & Bimber, B. (2013). Political consumerism: Civic engagement and the social media connection. New Media and Society, 16(3), 488–506.*

[38] *Ross, K., & Bürger, T. (2014). Face-to-face(book) social media, political campaigning and the unbearable lightness of being there. Political Science, 66(1), 46–62.*

[39] *Williamson, A. (2009). The effect of digital media on MPs' communication with constituents. Parliamentary Affairs, 62(3), 525.*

9. Effects on Opinion and Political Actions

Numerous studies have been conducted on the influence of social media on citizens' political attitudes and behaviors. Dahlgren seeks to understand the role of social media within social contexts to identify their true democratic potential. He warns that weaknesses in democratic systems cannot be solved solely through social media or media technologies but require citizen engagement to address them. Dahlgren summarizes the often-mentioned positive aspects and hopes for social media, including increased communication among citizens, cost-effectiveness, space for creative participation, opinion formation, mobilization, and the potential to bring attention to political issues through viral posts and personal benefits such as empowerment.

However, he also acknowledges concerns such as digital divide, the fact that political engagement does not simply follow internet and social media access, online bullying and harassment, as well as fears of social media abuse for surveillance and political control, and deliberate dissemination of fake news. Dahlgren continues to remind us that "political participation is more than just access to media or communicative interaction; these are often necessary but never sufficient for substantive politics. Politics always involves a degree of contestation/battle in the social world".

Gibson and McAllister argue that political participation is positively influenced by real-world social interactions and, therefore, it is of interest to further explore the effects of different online networks. They used the Australian Election Study, a nationwide self-completion survey conducted after the 2007 federal elections, to examine the effects of interactions with bonding and bridging networks. Gibson and McAllister find that there is indeed a distinction between these two types of networks regarding the mobilization of offline participation. "The findings show that bonding, rather than bridging, ties in online social networks predict offline participation, suggesting that online interactions that are not built on existing offline networks are less effective at mobilizing 'real world' participation"[40].

The websites of local government institutions in the USA do not appear to have an impact on citizen participation in policy-making processes. However, the creation of a website can be an important factor in mobilizing citizens and establishing online spaces that have an impact on political participation and citizen discourse. According to Følstad and Lüders, a survey among 90 participants in Norway resulted in 64% stating that an online political environment would lead to higher political engagement, driven by the feeling of having influence, access to political debates, regular engagement in events, increased awareness, and motivation to engage in local politics. To engage citizens in online political debates, there needs to be an attractive topic, a specific willingness to contribute, frustration with a particular situation, and reciprocal. Party websites should offer high-quality information and a space for user interactions where different viewpoints are tolerated. Følstad and others prioritize informative content over engagement features for regular users of websites, advising that information should complement other online content, be tailored to the local context, and highlight perspectives or marked opinions.

Before concluding, it is necessary to acknowledge the contribution that social media have to new social and political movements, such as the London and South African protests in 2011 and 2008, the Stuttgart and Istanbul protests in 2010 and 2013, the Occupy movements of 2012, and the Arab Spring movements (Abbott, 2012)[41]. Additionally, illiberal, non-emancipatory, and right-wing populist movements also benefit from the opportunities of new media for influencing debates, organizing, and mobilizing. Furthermore, social media can be used for the dissemination and organization of information outside traditional media, which may be under government control (Dunne, 2015)[42].

Conversely, social media platforms are increasingly targeted by governments to influence and manipulate public opinion online, sometimes using covert, non-transparent, and illegitimate methods. Dunne discusses regional variations in social media mobilization, claiming that some Western citizens simply lack a strong enough will to increase direct democracy either online or offline due to time constraints or disinterest, arguing that otherwise, we would see more protests by individuals attempting to effect change.

10. Summary of Perspectives on the Role of Social Media

The key questions and discussions currently remain unresolved, which is not surprising considering the relatively recent emergence of social media, approximately 15 years ago. Despite the urgency of the topic in scientific research, the extent to which social media are able to fulfill the essential functions of public communication, such as criticism, deliberation,

[40] Gibson, R. K., & McAllister, I. (2013). Online social ties and political engagement. Journal of Information Technology and Politics, 10(1), 21–34.

[41] Abbott, J. (2012). Social media. In N. Kersting (Ed.), Electronic democracy (pp. 77–102). Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers.

[42] Dunne, K. (2015). ICTs: Convenient, yet subsidiary tools in changing democracy. International Journal of E-Politics (IJEP), 6(2), 1–13.

and integration, needs to be addressed by academics and experts in the field (Imhof, 2011) [43]. In this regard, social media not only challenge previous concepts and models of the public sphere but phenomena such as echo chambers, deliberate misinformation, manipulation, and surveillance appear to threaten the integrity of the key functions of the public sphere in democracy. Considering the distortions in information exchange and the increasing role of personal and emotional perspectives in politics, as well as progressive ideas on how democratic institutions can respond to this potential transformation, becomes highly valuable.

11. Conclusions

Electronic democracy (e-Democracy) is now a widely used term describing a broad range of practices for electronic public engagement in political decision-making and opinion formation. In terms of theoretical concepts of democracy, e-Democracy is usually based on participatory and deliberative democracy models. The high and overly enthusiastic expectations for a fundamental transformation of modern democracy through the application of online tools for political participation and public debate have diminished after two decades of experience with e-Democracy, thereby creating room for stronger concepts and analyses that are less determined by information and communication technologies (ICT). However, there are doubts that e-Democracy will add new modes of communication between citizens and representatives of representative democracy, along with their electoral areas. These changes not only amplify online political processes but also influence various aspects of offline political processes. They depend primarily on the wide variety of applied e-Democracy tools, the nature of the political process they are involved in, and the abilities, requirements, and expectations of those involved in implementing these processes.

Research on the impact of social media on democracy lacks a clear conclusion, allowing us to draw only temporary conclusions about the political dimensions of social media. The literature tends to agree that social media play an increasingly important role in civil and political life, as these communication opportunities are used not only by social movements and activists but also by governments and government-sponsored groups. However, while many studies have attempted to provide evidence of the tangible political effects of social media usage, the transformative power often associated with social media remains more of a possibility than a stable reality, especially regarding established models of participatory politics. Based on the currently available findings, we can conclude that social media have both positive and negative effects on democratic politics, enabling broader inclusion and the emergence of less represented perspectives, while also harboring significant risks of distorted discourse, disinformation, and communication barriers.

While the urgent need for coherent empirical evidence on the impact of social media on democracy remains a topic of scientific research, academics and experts in the field should also address the fundamental question of the extent to which social media are capable of fulfilling the essential functions of public communication, specifically public criticism, legitimization, and integration. In this regard, social media and the notion of "personalized politics" seem to challenge established concepts and models of the public sphere. The endeavor to understand the role of personal and emotional perspectives in politics (claimed to be increasing) and progressive ideas on how democratic institutions can respond to this potential transformation are becoming more pressing than ever before. Moreover, phenomena such as egocentrism, echo chambers, deliberate misinformation, and electronic propaganda are threatening the fundamental functioning of the public sphere in the democratic context, thereby increasing the need for effective responses in education, law, and technology.

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