

Changing Media – Changing Democracy? Exploring the Democratic Potential of Social Media

20 Anniversary Conference of the Institute for Comparative Media and Communication Studies
along with the
4th Research Conference of the Austrian Research Association - Working Group on the Future of
Democracy
and the 2014 Workshop of the “Network Media Structures”

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Topic and aim of the conference: In January 2014, Facebook reported profits that beat Wall Street’s expectations, and its worldwide user base grew to 1.2 billion in the fourth quarter of 2013, up 16% from a year earlier (even when Facebook is gaining fewer new users than in past quarters). In the German speaking countries, on average 3 (!) out of 8 people are active Facebook users. Unsurprisingly, there is widespread consensus that social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are changing political communication. However, no such consensus exists when it comes to assessing the effects that the emergence of social network services, blogging environments, online discussion forums, and content communities have on political processes. On the one hand, it is argued that the widespread use of the Internet for social networking, blogging, video-sharing, and tweeting fosters participatory democracy. Just as the decentralization of media leads to a reduction in the distance between the actors of political communication, the classical division of roles between actors in and around the political system become less distinct. Politicians and media are no longer the sole producers of political information; instead actors from civil society, i.e., citizens and NGOs are appearing as contributors to the political discourse. What is being expressed here is the hope for the democratic ideal of a deliberative communication forum on the Web, based on the expectation that the diversity and accessibility of media options lower the barriers to engage in public discourse.

This optimistic view of a universally accessible, transparent discourse is challenged by the notion that it is precisely the universal accessibility and global public sphere of the digital networks that can also facilitate forms of use which threaten democracy. One of the main reasons for this more pessimistic view is that governments as well as large private-sector corporations are increasingly using social media as a

means of maintaining ever-greater control over citizens. In this view, social media are perceived as highly centralized networks in which content is disseminated through just a few influential hubs, and in which most users, regardless of their personal background, defer to these conventions of form and content. A further critical perspective on the structural features of the Web relates to the danger that the public sphere may disintegrate into fragmented partial publics (“Teilöffentlichkeiten”) that can no longer connect sufficiently to form a shared public world. Consequently, with regard to the potential for intellectual reflection, it is argued that Internet users are presented with content which is perfectly tailored and filtered to meet their preferences.

These two evaluations of the influence of online media on the political process refer to two contradictory theses: the so-called “normalization thesis”, which sees what is being done with the methods of the new media as a continuation of earlier, offline communication practices, however, in a more comprehensive way and, thus, jeopardizing former democratic achievements, and the “innovation hypothesis”, which focuses on the potential of online media to revitalize a broad democratic discourse.

The Viennese conference aims to shed light on these developments by exploring the changes to political processes as triggered by the changing media structures along three perspectives, which might be responsible for different assessments of the democratic potential of social media: citizens, politicians, journalists.

The Citizens’ Perspective: Processes of political communication used to be primarily linear, and shaped by professional communicators. The question arising now is to what extent social media disrupt this linear form. The underlying idea of such media is that everyone on the Web can potentially take part in discussions and initiate topics, an area previously monopolized by mass media and other professional communicators. On the Web, topics are generated in an interactive exchange in which citizens can (at least) partially assume the functions of journalism. As reflected by the concept of “produsage”, production and usage form a joint process in which contents are changed dynamically by means of interactivity, multiple user groups and thematic shifts. Research questions are concerned with the consequences of this tremendous acceleration in processes of interaction and the exchange of information, brought about by the ubiquity of media communications, as well as with the ability of social media to promote a “bottom-up” form of political opinion-making (as opposed to former top-down influences) due to low access barriers, a great number of various discussion forums and the aid of a new, participatory journalism. Last but not least it has to be asked whether an “autonomous public sphere”

(as conceived by Habermas) can be revived in the digital age, thus turning the linearity of political processes in a “networking democracy”.

The Politicians’ Perspective: After all, it is not only citizens but also those involved in political PR who are increasingly learning how to react flexibly to the challenges posed by the new communication technologies. The prime goal here is to adapt one’s strategies to the multitude of different media channels and the even greater diversity of media usage. Thus for example there are moves to revive decentralized (but centrally regulated) forms of communication, and to coordinate marketing activities so as to precisely target segmented groups. In order to be able to make profitable use of Internet-based communication, i.e. to combine the control capacity offered by direct technologies with more accurate targeting and lower costs, data on media use and personal profiles of users are required as well as constant efforts to fine-tune the methods deployed to gather this information. Therefore, on the one hand, it has to be asked as to how the roles of communication specialists and managers, polling institutes and “spin doctors” are changing and whether these consulting services are becoming even more important than in the days of mainstream television. This is bound to have significant repercussions for politics. Moreover, the interplay between rapidly advancing communication technologies, corresponding PR strategies, and new opportunities for participation, combined with increasing competition between politicians and parties canvassing for votes, gives rise to a dynamic which enables political actions to take place as “permanent campaigning”, the consequences of which for the viability of democratic structures should be considered.

The Journalists’ Perspective: Finally, a further consequence of digital communication applications in the “network society” (as Castells has called it) concerns the changing relationships within the media system. The prevalence of social networks has not only led to a change in media usage, culminating in an (inter)active approach to the online media, and given new importance to direct forms of communication, but has also led to a diversification of the range of media available, combined with simultaneous shifts within media structures. This pertains both to the fundamental changes in the television sector, in which a large number of specialized programmes (“narrowcasting”) have replaced what was formerly mainstream television, and to similar processes of specialization in the press, which have occurred at least partly in response to the new digital channels of distribution. In these more competitive structures, at least some of the previous players are becoming less important while those remaining in the market are forced to enter into new inter-media processes in which the roles of “sender” and “receiver” are far less clearly divided than traditional journalism would like them to be. It has become clear that (particularly)

political journalism as we know it is in search of a redefinition of its purpose and social contract, as well as a reconstitution of its boundaries that have become alarmingly fuzzy with the rise of participatory modes of communication. Given the fact that information on politics is to most people “second hand” information, the implications of this redefinition for the journalism’s normative functions and performative roles are one of the most important challenges in democratic societies.

Submission and selection of papers: The call is open to all social sciences. We invite paper proposals which address one of the three main perspectives or focus on comparing and relating two or more perspectives. Conference submissions are for 20-minute presentations and should be made in English or German. The extended abstract must not be longer than 8,000 characters (including blank spaces). Please add a title page to the abstract containing the name(s) and address(es) of the author(s) and the title of the presentation. Please send your proposal to the organizers (cmc@oeaw.ac.at) no later than **July 15th, 2014** (using a PDF file). All submissions will be anonymously peer-reviewed according to the criteria of originality, relevance, theoretical foundation, appropriateness of the methods used, clarity of language, and reference to the conference theme. All submitters will be informed about the outcome of the selection process by August 31th, 2014.

Integrated PhD workshop, November 7th: The conference will be supplemented by a workshop in which PhD students can present their dissertation research in media structures without any thematic restrictions imposed. Renowned scholars will comment on the presentations, thus offering a unique opportunity to obtain constructive feedback from experts. Abstracts for submission to the PhD workshop can also be in English or German, must not exceed 8,000 characters (including blank spaces) and should also be submitted to cmc@oeaw.ac.at no later than **July 15th, 2014**.

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