New Media and Social Media’s role in the future of democracy

Nicole Ruskell
University of Sheffield

Abstract
Traditional democratic channels have become antiquated and lost the interest of the people. Advancements in technology are not only expanding the power of social media’s effect on politics, but are also involving citizens in political debate like never before. The Five Star Movement in Italy is perfect example of digital media as vehicle for a populist movement and changing the political atmosphere to a more direct democracy. The biggest role of Internet technology in the future of democracy lies in social media platforms that offer new ways to engage in civic activism and involve young voters.

“Democracy should be a celebration by an involved public. Citizens should be active because it is through public discussion, deliberation, and involvement that societal goals should be defined and carried out.”

The Internet is transforming the use of traditional media and providing a new and interactive system of communication with the public sphere (Street, 2011, 261). Online news sources, social networking sites, YouTube videos and blogs are bypassing television as the main source of public information, and connecting citizens in an open and democratic way. Political candidates are starting to ride the wave of New Media, which has spurred some of the largest populist movements the world has seen. But the established systems of democratic rule are based on old values and no technology. This paper will look at how digital media is changing politics, civic participation and the future of democracy.

For the last half-century, television has been the ultimate tool for reaching the masses. Still today, the majority of the world gets its information from the television. Candidates’ campaigns have been made or broken by televised debates, negative ads and twenty-four hour news cycles. But in the 1960s, when televisions were starting to appear in every household, critics feared its effect on mass society: “Critics feared that television would sedate people into inertia, to care about nothing except the next show, offering bread and circuses. They accused television of drawing audiences away from their civic duties” (Butsch, 2008, 107). Mass media, Butsch said, 'by-passes' local leaders’ opinions and weakens communities. This, in turn, isolates individuals, making them “passive and inactive” (109).

In fact, over the last two decades, voter participation has dwindled in most Western nations, and the growing political apathy has worried researchers about the lack of civic participation. A report by the American Political Science Association stated:

1 (Dalton, 2008: 32)
“American democracy is at risk. ... Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues and less equally than is healthy for a vibrant democratic polity. (quoted in Dalton, 2008: 32)

However, the last decade has seen some amazing changes in politics. Social media platforms, interactive media and growing awareness have led to populist movements across the planet. People have found a voice through the Internet and their political participation has evolved. Dalton argues that allegations of apathy are misleading. While he agrees that mass publics are abandoning the traditional avenues of political participation (mainly voting), they are becoming more active in what he calls “elite-challenging forms of political action” (Dalton, 2008, 33).

#YesWeCan

Obama’s groundbreaking grassroots campaign of 2008 showed the world the possibilities of harnessing social media for political support. Social networks, political blogs and ‘viral’ sharing of YouTube videos rapidly stimulated political activity and community activism. The ‘isolation’ and ‘inertia’ of television watching was permanently shattered by the power of the Internet. Obama’s Facebook page alone had 2.4 million followers, as opposed to his opponent’s, John McCain’s, 64,000 (Johnson et al., 2010, 192). Obama’s campaign also proved the Internet’s ability to garner donations. In his first campaign, he raised 88% of his funds online, 50% more than McCain (ibid: 191).

The previously unknown Obama became a household name through YouTube, including citizen-produced videos like “Crush on Obama” and “Yes we can” by Will.I.am, which received ten million views at the beginning of Obama’s campaign (ibid: 192).

The Internet’s full potential of reaching the masses is achieved when internet media and mainstream media join forces. YouTube partnered with media outlets such as CNN and PBS to sponsor presidential debates with video questions uploaded by the public. Studies showed these debates attracted a 10% larger audience of 18-34 year olds (ibid).

The youth vote was a decisive factor in the election. “Facebook helped attract new, young voters who provided Obama with his margin of victory. The number of voters under 30 rose by 3.4 million from 2004 to 2008 and about 66% of those voters supported Obama” (ibid).

‘Rock the vote’

Bill Clinton’s US presidential campaign recognised the significance of involving the youth vote. The most popular television channel with young people at the time was MTV2. They worked with the ‘Rock the Vote’ organisation, which encouraged youth involvement in politics, by blending rock and pop concerts with politically charged events – getting young people not only interested, but registered to vote.

But surveys and polls by traditional data collection consistently proved the youth’s disinterest in politics and failure to show up to the polls. William Damon (quoted in Dalton), said:

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2 Bill Clinton appeared on MTV in July 1992, for a Q&A session with young voters.
“Young people across the world have been disengaging from civic and political activities to a degree unimaginable a mere generation ago. The lack of interest is greatest in mature democracies, but it is evident even in many emerging or troubled ones. Today there are no leaders, no causes, no legacy of past trials or accomplishments that inspire much more than apathy or cynicism from the young” (2008: 60)

Dalton rails against such a ‘blanket indictment’ about the young. While there is no contention about the data showing poor voter turnout of the youth, he argues that by focusing solely on electoral participation, scholars have neglected the full range of political involvement available today.

Diana Oates (2006) supports this claim: “Younger citizens have been engaging in political activities below the radar screens of observers and scholars who focus on conventional behaviours” (20-24). Young people, she says, are even better and more sophisticated in using new media and will carry that with them as they get older. “Experience with the medium, and the heightened levels of proficiency and comfort in using the Internet, may prompt younger generations to develop a lively political life online as they age” (Oates, et al, 2006: 20-24).

Social media spreads ideas and information exponentially from one user to another. When a story gains popularity and spreads rapidly, it is said to have ‘gone viral,’ an appropriate description for the way information literally spreads from person to person. Today’s youth have grown up with the concept of ‘viral media’ and approach their role in society differently than older generations.

In The Networked Self (2011), Johnson, et al. discuss how young people approach digital media differently than their older counterparts, fully grasping the idea of ‘viral communication.’ “Young voters may also use social media networks differently than older ones, as most see themselves as more than consumers of news but conduits, emailing friends, links and videos, and receiving them in return” (190).

In fact, kids too young to vote are still getting involved, posting passionate political pleas. Figures 1 and 2 are posts from underage children emphatically pleading to their fellow teenagers to convince parents and family to vote for their preferred candidate.

Figure 1: Twitter, @People4Bernie
These Tweets support Dalton and Oates’ belief that contrary to studies, the youth are more active and involved than ever before.

**The Active Citizen and the new public sphere**

It has been traditionally thought that ‘active citizenship’ required knowledge of world events, politics, and general education. “A time-consuming process” according to Coleman and Blumer (2009: 42). But the wealth of information available from the Internet through a simple Google search, archived news stories, Wikipedia and links on social media inform and involve people independently of formal education. Additionally, social media is allowing citizens to interact with anyone anywhere in the world. The isolation of television and its one-way communication is now becoming impotent and obsolete for informing the public sphere.

The Internet, contends Dalton (2008), has led to a ‘cognitive mobilisation’, where the public sphere is more educated and able to process political theory more than ever before (18). This leads voters to be more independent in their views and less attached to party affiliation (188). With so much political information available online, and politically charged social activism websites like MoveOn.org, the Internet not only informs but has also led to what he calls ‘wired activism’ (52).

In *Mass Media, Politics & Democracy* (2011), John Street discusses the profound change the Internet has had on politics. He argues political information is no longer governed by the traditional media ‘gate-keepers’ (264). By supplying a new system of communication, the Internet has transformed democracy into a “less hierarchical social order” (267) and has the potential to ‘revive’ the direct democracy of ancient Athens (269).

“The worldwide web has created the conditions for more advanced or a more effective form of democracy. With the networks in place and interactive technology to hand, people will be able to vote on issues, inform themselves on government policy and interrogate their representatives. The can become the active, effective citizens of the democratic dream” (Street, 2011).
This idea is perfectly supported by Jack Dorsey, the creator of Twitter, when he stated at the 2012 Digital Life Design Conference in Munich: “Twitter is a public medium that hosts public conversation in a way simple enough for anyone to use” (quoted in Lutz and du Toit, 2014: 52). Twitter allows anybody to ‘follow’ the people or issues that interest them, even allowing direct interaction with politicians. With the option to reply or ‘tag’ any user, including politicians, ordinary citizens can interact with those they follow. Figure 3 shows President Obama replying to a person’s direct question. With the use of the hash tag: ‘#AskPOTUS’, anyone can pose a question to the US President.

Figure 3: Twitter, @POTUS

![Image of Twitter post](image)

This newfound connectivity has brought the political sphere to the average person and increases political accountability.

**Monitory democracy**

In *Mass media, politics & democracy*, John Street (2011) discusses how a healthy political life has been damaged by ratings-obsessed media, and politicians that rely on constituent data to stay in office (332-33). He puts forward John Keane’s idea of a ‘monitory democracy’ where the people are able to monitor public officials through social media and hold them accountable. “Every nook and cranny of power becomes the potential target of ‘publicity’ and ‘public exposure’; monitory democracy threatens to expose the quiet discriminations and injustices that happen behind closed doors and in the world of everyday life” (quoted in Street, 2011: 334).

An example of monitory democracy, are Facebook posts about politician’s voting. Figure 4 was posted by the Organic Consumer’s Association, a group that fights for genetically modified food labelling:
This is a brilliant example of monitory democracy at work, passing on information and providing phone numbers for people to hold their representatives accountable. By sharing this image, the information goes ‘viral’ and could span the globe within a short period of time.

“One of the ways in which social media enhances democratic participation is through the potential global connectivity of this technology. Individuals also gain almost complete control over the content of the statements they release on the Internet. Individual self-expression, a key component of democratic participation, is therefore presented into the public space more efficiently than ever before” (Lutz and du Toit, 2014: 3).

**Grassroots campaigns**

Facebook and Twitter accounts are now a necessity for both mainstream politicians and political hopefuls around the world. This has fundamentally changed the political landscape. It has shifted political campaigns from the typical ‘top-down’ style, to the ‘grassroots’ style, which has become increasingly popular and successful. According to Richard Butsch (2008), “web-based political social networking requires empowerment—introducing well-trained, highly motivated local supporters to one another and then turning the campaign over to them” (190). This type of empowerment to local activists has boosted the influence of populist movements and the popularity of ‘underdog’ or anti-establishment candidates. This can be seen in the recent campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn for UK Labour party, Italy’s *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, and most recently, in the US presidential campaigns of both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump.

When the Internet was first gaining popularity in the mid-1990s, entering ‘www.’ in the address bar didn’t have the significance that it does today. The ‘world wide web’ is exactly that—a web of connectivity that spans the entire world. This fact alone has made profound
changes on our awareness of current events, including the plight of the oppressed and breaking news as it happens.

Even though the widespread use of social media has made people feel involved in the political process, many people hopeful of change feel they have not seen it. Political promises, protests, and even revolts brought people hope for change. Instead, a continuation of the status quo, has left people across the world have become disillusioned with politics and feel more detached from their governments. In some ways, people’s ability to 'connect' with their government leaders via social media has proven that their participation does not affect change. Studies show that even when people organise and speak out, those in power either do not listen or are not willing to make the changes requested (Coleman and Blumer, 2009: 1).

This problem has been particularly clear in Italy. The economic crisis and subsequent austerity measures have been disastrous. Brought to the verge of default, Italy has seen their ‘political elite’ impose harsh cuts and numerous tax increases, all the while protecting themselves and, in some cases, raising their own salaries.

**Movimento Cinque Stelle**

In 2009, comedian Beppe Grillo, registered the Five Star Movement (M5S). It was a grassroots movement for a new political system, one that refused to accept the status quo of Italian politics. Described as a movement for direct democracy, the organisation’s decree states:

“The 5 Star Movement is not a political party and it is not intended to become one in the future. It wants to be a witness to the possibility of bringing about an efficient and efficacious exchange of opinions and democratic encounter outside of party and associative ties and without the mediation of directive or representational organisms, recognising to all users of the internet the role of government and direction that is normally attributed to a few.” (Beppe Grillo’s Blog, 2011)

In an interview with the Dutch program, VPRO, Grillo praised the Internet for its full equality, citing his blog, [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) as an example. He boasted the blog has over 60 million registered users, with contributors from Nobel Peace Prize winners to labourers. He said: “This is the beauty of the net—one equals one—a Nobel Prize winner counts as much as a labourer (operaio)).”

By 2011, in the midst of economic crisis, record-breaking unemployment and a complete disillusion with politicians, M5S was filling public squares and rapidly gaining the support of the youth. Jamie Bartlett, director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at the think tank, Demos, has analysed M5S’s data and written extensively on them: “Grillo has, by an enormous margin, the largest social media following of any politician in Europe: he has more than one million Facebook friends, and a similar number of Twitter followers – Bersani has about a quarter of that (as does David Cameron). His blog is the most widely read in Italy” (2015).

Grillo’s brash comments, insults and angry demands for all politicians to ‘go home’ inspired the public and his rallies filled Italy’s largest piazzas to the max. But it didn’t sit well with the country’s ruling elite. The Italian press treated Grillo as an absurd joke and a raving lunatic

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3 In 2013, Presidente della Repubblica, Giorgio Napolitano, raised his own salary €8,835 to €248,017 pa.
4 This quote can be found at 33:32 in the online video: [http://tegenlicht.vpro.nl/aflveringen/2010-2011/aanval-op-europa/toekomst-europa-Beppe-grillo.html](http://tegenlicht.vpro.nl/aflveringen/2010-2011/aanval-op-europa/toekomst-europa-Beppe-grillo.html)
who had no business in politics. In addition to personal attacks, these rallies, with tens of thousands of people, were downplayed or completely ignored on Italian television. It was only through his blog and social media sites that one could see the true proportions of his events. In response, Grillo black-listed the Italian media and ordered a complete shut-out for all M5S members in giving interviews to Italian television (though he readily gives interviews to the international media). This created a complete reliance on Internet communication, where his message could reach people directly.

Figure 5: Facebook, MoVimento 5 Stelle

“The inability to have a privileged relationship with the local press makes the use of direct forms of communication with the citizens necessary, including the gazebo in the square held by activists, who for militants symbolically reconstructs a form of agora, which a tool for equal peer exchange between simple citizens” (Capuzzi, 69).

As we have seen, the most successful campaigns come from a combination of online social networking and actual social activism. The best example of this is the Five Star Movement. By using the site MeetUp.com, Grillo provided an online networking platform that brought together like-minded people by physical location who could then organise meetings to discuss current political issues and meet their local M5S representative. “These Meetups formed the backbone of the organization by empowering local MeetUp organizers to be activists” (Moving away from traditional party politics: Italy's Five Star Movement, 2015).

“The Five Star Movement constitutes the greatest change to the Italian political scene in the last decade and in the last political elections – held in February 2013 – it emerged as the main party, obtaining 25.5% of electoral consensus” (Lanzone and Rombi, 2014: 172).

5 Translated from Italian. The original quote: “L'impossibilità di avere un rapporto privilegiato con la stampa locale rende inoltre fondamentale l'utilizzo di forme comunicative dirette con la cittadinanza, tra cui i gazebo in piazza svolti dagli attivisti, che per i militanti ricostruiscono simbolicamente una forma di agrò nella quale avviene lo scambio tra pari, tra semplice cittadini.”
The party that refused to be a party, swept the election, with more voters turning out than any other single party (Bartlett, 2015). Bartlett, believes that M5S’s astounding rise and remarkable election results is a lesson to all:

“This election was a litmus test on whether social media campaigning and support can translate into actual votes. The result is a resounding yes. The melange of virtual and real-world political activity is the way millions of people relate to politics in the 21st century. Formal membership of political parties is plummeting, while social media following – Facebook groups or Twitter followers – is growing fast. Grillo has shown how to use them” (Bartlett, 2015).

The election not only involved young voters, but also young candidates. Lanzone and Rombi (2014) found that compared to the average parliamentarian age of 42, the M5S list of candidates averaged 38 years and the average age of those elected is 36. But 30% of those recently elected are under 29 (185). M5S has brought in some of the youngest members of parliament, including Marta Grande, the youngest deputy in this legislature.

Despite M5S’s rapid rise in popularity and their lofty goals of changing Italian politics, the movement is not without its faults, internal fighting and disagreement with the leadership. Members have even been kicked out for criticising the un-democratic leadership (del Savio and Mameli, 2014). Nonetheless, the movement's brilliant use of social media can be a lesson for all. Bartlett poses the question of whether their successful model of blending internet-based communication and activism with real-world meetings and rallies could ‘sweep’ European politics as well.

“So is Grillo the first of a new wave of social media politicians, ready to sweep Europe? Perhaps. Grillo’s mélange of virtual and real-world political activity is the way millions of people — especially young people — relate to politics in the twenty-first century. This nascent, messy and more ephemeral form of politics is becoming the norm for a younger, digital generation” (Bartlett, 2013).

The future

A leftist, populist movement has not just swept through Italy, but also in Spain with the Podemos party, Greece’s Syriza party, the massive turnout for Jeremy Corbyn during the Labour party primary, and the growing Pirate parties in Germany and Sweden. Even in the United States, a self-proclaimed Socialist is taking the country by storm. Could we be seeing a ‘fourth wave’ of democracy? What is the future of democracy as new media continues to evolve?

Regardless of the success (or lack there of) with these movement’s goals, there is no denying the importance and potential of the Internet. Social networks are tools that can be used in many ways. However, they have found a natural home in their ability to organise and mobilise masses of people. Social networks have already become the main tool for protests and the driving force for populist movements.

The 2016 US presidential campaign is using social media more than ever before, and more than half of the televised debates have been co-sponsored by Internet tech companies (Mali and McCabe, 2016). New tools are constantly being introduced to measure public response and provide feedback to campaign managers. Facebook introduced a new tool at the GOP debate on 10 March, which allowed viewers to react and share their thoughts in real-time,
during the debate. Results were put into a graph, also in real-time, for the campaigns (and the public) to see. Adam Sharp, the head of news, politics and elections for Twitter, said: “Fifty years of televised presidential debates and [it was] the first time that people yelling at the screen had their voice heard on the stage” (ibid).

Figure 6: Twitter, @DigiPhile

We are still in the early stages of the Internet age and it has only been a few years that access to the Internet has been available on a global scale. There are wrinkles to work out and systems to redevelop, and we still have yet to see a government to completely move to e-voting. Street (2011) contends that politics does not yet fit the technology available today and politicians themselves feel uncomfortable with the different role they will play in direct democracy (279).

Scholars suggest that SNSs are successful in stimulating political activity because they lower the cost of seeking out political information and sharing with friends (Johnson et al., 2011, 191).

Critics of today’s ‘apathy’ to politics and civic engagement complain that the public is more likely to vote for the winner of X-Factor, than the next Prime Minister. But is the mode of easy voting from your phone overlooked as a deciding factor? In a world where nearly everything is done online by any Smartphone, is it correct to blame the public for failing to take off of work and stand in line to cast a physical ballot?

Coleman and Blumer (2009) respond to complaints by British MPs about Big Brother getting a better voter response than the European elections. They say that tradition forms of democratic involvement have lost their ability to engage the public. They also point out that no attempts have been made to understand why the youth have become so disinterested in politics, nor have political campaigners learned from the strategies employed by reality television (145).
Dalton (2008) begs the question of the importance of voting for representatives in the first place. He argues that casting a vote only a few times over a 4-5 year period is not supportive for active policy engagement (54).

“We often equate political participation with the act of voting. But if you consider political influence from the citizen’s perspective, you will see that participation is not limited to voting, nor is voting necessarily the most effective means of affecting public policy” (Dalton, 2008)

He proposes that instead of waiting years for the next election to try to ‘change’ policy, creating groups, writing letters and protesting is more actively engaging and challenges politics in a better way.

“Network technology has the potential to create a new public sphere which fits the social structure better … However, politics does not yet fit the new technology. Politicians feel uncomfortable with the different role they play in such a challenging direct democracy” (quoted in Street, 2011).

Conclusion

We are still in the infancy of the digital age, but the harnessing of the Internet for starting, organising and achieving change is proof of its potential for promoting direct democracy. There are wrinkles to work out, systems to redevelop, and we have yet for a government to introduce widespread e-voting. In the chapter, “Shaping e-democracy”, Coleman and Blumer (2008) quote UK ministerial speeches on the introduction of e-participation:

“In order to attract people to get involved in online consultations, governments must prove that there is a relationship between the citizen’s engagement and policy outcome. … But the real challenge if we are to convince the public of the potential of e-participation it is for government to prove that it is ready to listen. The Internet not only enables the public to respond more quickly, more fully to government consultation, but will also make more transparent to the public whether the government itself is willing to respond to the views that have been expressed.” (147)

Coleman and Blumer point out that the minister’s speeches focused on democratic theory instead of technological hurdles. This, they say shows that the technology to move to e-voting is readily available. But only time will tell when governments will begin making the switch.

“This process of democratic experimentation and reform may be threatening to some, and it does present a risk—but change is necessary. The challenge to democracies is to discover whether they can continue to evolve, to guarantee political rights, and to increase the ability of citizens to control their lives.” (ibid)

According Dalton (2008), “the current crisis of democracy is really just another stage in the ongoing history of democracy’s development. Democracies need to adapt to present-day politics and to the new style of citizen politics” (258). With rise of populist movements proving the effectiveness of online activism, changes can’t be far off.
Bibliography


