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Article:

Politicians and Political Parties' Use of Social Media in-between Elections

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Abstract

Digital transformation changes the relationship between citizens and politics. The observation of this nexus is highly relevant for representative democracy. After the successful 2008 Obama campaign, a vast body of research that explores how and why politicians use social media has emerged. However, we still know very little about how social media are being

adopted and used in-between elections, and still less yet about what this means for political representation. Therefore, this Special Issue brings together innovative research that focuses on how the use of social media is impacting upon the relationship between politicians and political parties, and citizens. First, we discuss some pros and cons of this transformation in the context of the relevant literature and, especially, in relation to Stephen Coleman's concept of 'direct representation". Finally, we discuss the findings and merits of the contributions and what the issue adds to our understanding of the phenomenon, to the state of research.

Introduction

In an age of digital media, a time where we have seen much change in modes of communication and engagement, this Special Issue brings together innovative research that focuses on how the use of social media is impacting upon the relationship between politicians and political parties, and citizens. With the arrival of the internet, much has been made of the potential of digital information and communication technologies for reinvigorating public debate, political participation, civic engagement, and in transforming representative democracy itself. However, early empirical studies showed how for many years, parties and politicians (especially parliaments) regularly used new media as top-down information hubs – as 'brochureware' and 'shovelware' – rather than interactive (listening and conversational) tools (Chadwick 2006; Gibson and Ward 1998; Gibson et al. 2003; Lusoli et al. 2006; Stromer-Galley 2000). Resultantly, they rarely offered 'any significant reconnection or possible deepening of existing connections citizens has to their representatives or representative institutions' (Gibson et al. 2008: 127). However, with the rise of social media and the digital media culture that has arisen in its wake, politicians, parties and parliaments have been increasingly adopting social media, not only as a means of remaining relevant to citizens and adapting to changing times, but also as a means of tackling the growing disconnect with the public.

Much of the scholarly interest in the potential of digital information and communication technologies seems to be justified and driven by a concern about a growing rift between politicians and political institutions on the one hand and those they serve on the other (Coleman 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Flickinger and Studlar 2007). In particular, we have seen growing public cynicism and distrust towards politicians and politics more broadly, and eroding public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy. As Coleman and Blumler (2009: 69) argue,

> In most contemporary democracies, whether old or new, parliamentary or presidential, the representative relationship is in chronic disrepair. There is a pervasive sense that politicians and the people they represent inhabit different worlds, speak mutually incomprehensible languages and fail to respect one another.

Amongst voters, there has been not only a decline in trust and efficacy but also a breakdown in the sense of 'feeling represented' by elected officials (Coleman 2013). In the United Kingdom, for example, citizens increasingly view their MPs as too distant, invisible, alien, arrogant and too partisan (Coleman 2005a, Coleman and Blumler 2009).[1] Peoples' perceptions are fundamental to the survival of representative democracy. However, there is

disagreement on whether representative democracy is in crisis or not (van Ham et al. 2017; Kersting 2013; Kriesi 2013). Instead, it is less controversial to claim that citizens increasingly distrust the political elite and question the principle of representativeness. Although trust in politics and political institutions vary greatly between countries and over time (van Ham and Thomassen 2017), a new report from the University of Cambridge's Centre for the Future of Democracy shows, people, particularly those from the United States and Western Europe, are losing faith in democratic systems (Foa et al. 2020).

Over the past decade, we have witnessed an unprecedented rise in the use and popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Such platforms have slowly, but increasingly engulfed formal politics. They have become a prominent tool for politicians and parties to provide information, mobilize their base and connect to the public directly (Broersma and Graham 2015; Graham, Broersma and Hazelhoff 2013). Parliaments too have been increasingly developing online strategies to promote public engagement, though this has varied from country to country (in the EU, e.g., see Schwanholz et al. 2018; Theiner et al. 2017). For example, the 2019 European Parliament election campaign saw the EU Parliament embrace digital media (thru their, e.g., 'thistimeimvoting.eu' website) as a means of mobilizing voters and tapping into its networking and community building potential (Bossetta 2020). Though Parliament's election strategy was multifaceted, its use of social media was arguably one of the key contributing factors in mobilizing voters; the 2019 election saw the highest voter turnout in two decades at 50.7%, an increase of eight points from the previous election (European Parliament 2019).

Social media are also important to citizens as spaces of everyday participation, allowing people to have a say in the public sphere and cultivating growth in non-electoral forms of political participation and engagement such as dual screening of political televised events and shows, online political talk and deliberation, digital activism, and other forms of online civic engagement (see, e.g., Anstead and O'Loughlin 2011; Coleman and Sampaio 2017; Coleman and Shane 2011; De Zúñiga et al. 2015; Kaun and Uldam 2018; Loader et al. 2014; Minocher 2019; Vaccari et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2015). However, these new online forms of participation and engagement do not always lead to 'healthy' practices/outcomes or achieve their intended goals/aims (see, e.g., Kersting 2013). That said, with an increasing emphasis on interactive, citizen-led, bottom-up communication and participation, citizens can no longer be viewed as passive receivers of political information, but rather as active participants in political processes. Yet we should be wary of equating this participation with either empowerment or normative claims of a 'better' politics. Despite the affordances of social media in breaking down old barriers (disintermediation), as noted above, there is a growing rift between elected representatives and political institutions on one side and those they are supposed to serve on the other. At the same time, we have witnessed the rise of an increasingly personalized, lifestyle politics where people undertake political actions that are not captured by traditional measures and are often outside of the formal political sphere (see Bennett 2012). Within such a climate, there is a pressing need for reconceiving the traditional relationship between representative institutions, elected representatives and citizens.

Direct Representation in the Age of Social Media

Already in the 90s, at the start of the 'third age of political communication', Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) considered the potential of the internet for liberal democracies. They found

the use of the internet at that time by politicians and political parties for democratic purposes to be emergent with minimal impact on political communication. Several so-called mobilization theories (Grossman 1995; Boulianne 2009) predicted a variety of new forms for inclusive participation. Scholars assumed that '[...] the Internet may reduce the costs of participation (time, effort) by increasing the availability of information' (Boulianne 2009). Later on, with the rise of Web 2.0 and then social media, scholars have looked again to digital information and communication technologies as a means of bridging the gap between elected representatives and political institutions, and citizens. Scholars have maintained that affordances and social norms such as interactivity, networking, sharing and self-disclosure make social media a potentially productive communicative space for developing a more direct relationship between politicians and citizens (see, e.g., Bruns and Burgess 2011; Graham, Broersma and Hazelhoff 2013; Graham et al. 2013). One of the most comprehensive conceptual frameworks in this regard has been the work of Stephen Coleman and his new model of democracy as 'direct representation'.

Over the past two decades, Coleman's research has investigated how the interactive and networking characteristics and affordances of digital information and communication technologies can establish permanent and ongoing channels of meaningful and effective dialogue and deliberation between elected representatives and *represented* citizens (see Coleman 1999, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2013, 2017; Coleman and Blumler 2009, 2012; Coleman and Moss 2008; Coleman and Shane 2011). Direct representation, as he calls it, consists of

'[…] techniques and technologies that go beyond formal consultation on pre-established policy agendas by mobilising, listening to, learning from, mapping and responding to diverse articulations of public experience and expertise. [It] entails an ongoing rather than episodic political conversation, inhabiting trusted spaces of everyday communication rather than being confined to official zones of electoral manipulation' (Coleman and Blumler 2009: 80).

At its centre, direct representation is a particular kind of connection that is based on rich interactive and conversational communication, which requires listening and mutual learning between representatives and constituents. In summary, it requires three key ingredients. First, communication between the two needs to be a conversation, a dialogue. This requires shared and trusted communicative spaces of everyday life (as opposed to official spaces during elections) where collaborative interaction and mutual learning between representatives and citizens can take place. Second, the conversation needs to be on-going and permanent as opposed to once every four years during an election campaign. The idea here is also about making oneself available for communication, not just the communication itself. This creates a connection, generating a stronger feeling of being represented. Third, representatives should start to 'account for themselves'. As Coleman and Moss (2008: 16) state, the obligation of representatives to account to, and hear accounts from, citizens becomes central to the act of representing'. This is a form of accountability whereby politicians *pro-actively* give accounts of and reasons for their actions. Overall, direct representation represents a shift from indirect to direct, a shift from disconnected to

connected representation. What Coleman has sought to do with this model of representation over the past two decades is to conceptualize a reconfiguration of representation via the use of digital information and communication technologies as the foundation for a more direct, but still representative democracy.

Contributions to the Special Issue

Since the late 2000s, a vast body of research that explores how (and to what extent) and why politicians use social media has emerged (for overviews of the field see Jungherr 2016 and Larsson and Svensson 2014). Studies in this area have focused on the factors behind adopting social media (e.g., Vergeer and Hermans 2013; Vergeer et al. 2011, 2013); the functions that social media posts may serve (e.g., Graham et al. 2013; Graham et al. 2016; Small 2010); the impact of political networks on social media (e.g., Bruns and Highfield 2013; Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013; Larsson and Moe 2013); campaigning strategies (e.g., Lilleker et al. 2011); whether social media behaviour is linked to electoral success (e.g., Jacobs and Spierings 2014); and the level of interactivity and personalized social media behaviour (e.g., Graham et al. 2013; Graham et al. 2016; Larsson and Ihlen 2015; McGregor 2016; Meeks 2016; Tromble 2018). Many of these studies have suggested that politicians still tend to adopt conservative approaches, for example, broadcasting over interactive behaviours, and networking with other elites over everyday citizens and constituents. However, this growing body of research has focused primarily on election campaigns. We still know very little about how social media are being adopted and used in-between elections, and still less yet about what this means for political representation; i.e., what impact it is having on the relationship between politicians and parties, and citizens.

The contributions in this Special Issue are an attempt to help fill in these gaps by providing deep empirical insight into the interconnections between politicians and citizens regarding their use of social media during non-election periods. It has been roughly two decades since Coleman first introduced the concept of direct representation. However, with the rise of social media, his conceptual framework becomes particularly relevant and gains new potential. All the contributions in this Special Issue are thus united by their aim to empirically address Coleman's theoretical work, reviewing his claim for 'direct representation' in the age of social media. They ask whether social media enhances the communicative relationships between representatives and those for whom they claim to represent. Through several national case studies – Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, Netherlands and Switzerland – and a look at the European Parliament, the contributions also help fill in the gap concerning our understanding of how politicians and parties use social media in-between elections. Finally, the Special Issue ends with an overall assessment by Stephen Coleman himself.

The Special Issue begins with a deep and sophisticated look into how Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) perceive their audience on digital media platforms – Facebook and Twitter – and how these perceptions overlap with audience's perceptions of itself. To understand how these representations are constructed, Sandrine Roginsky combines 70 semi-structured interviews with MEPs' assistants and MEPs (including candidates from the 2014 European Parliament Election) and four years of online participant observations, with a questionnaire survey (N=300) and 14 semi-structured interviews with citizens who followed French-speaking Belgian MEPs. This fresh take on (direct) representation asks with whom do MEPs think they are speaking to on Facebook and Twitter. Adopting Marwick and boyd's (2011) concept of the 'imagined audience', Roginsky begins her piece by identifying four

audience types emerging from the interviews with MEPs: the average citizen, the literate citizen, the activist, and the professional. Her findings reveal that when asked to think about, to conceptualize their audience, MEPs emphasized that 'followers need to be particularly interested in politics – implying that the average citizen is not the main audience of politicians on social media platforms'. The narrowness of MEPs imagined audience, especially on Twitter, seems to be in line with followers of politicians imagine of themselves. Followers of MEPs believe that people following MEPs, as one interviewee's response illustrates, are 'either people who are really, really interested in politics, [or people] who are active one way or another in politics'. Roginsky findings call into question the feasibility of the concept of direct representation when the main 'imagined' audience of politicians on digital media platforms is not 'the average citizen'.

In the second contribution to this Special Issue, Anders Olof Larsson examines the use of Facebook by Swedish political parties and citizens in-between and during election periods. Given the scarcity of longitudinal research in the field of online political communication, the approach here provides a rare look into the level of interaction – i.e., the number of posts by political parties and the feedback they received via likes, shares and comments from citizens – during four years covering two elections. Moreover, the comparative aspect of the approach is multidimensional, comparing the level of interaction and feedback received between parties during and between two consecutive general elections in 2010 and 2014. The aim ultimately is to 'provide an assessment of direct representation from the point of view of both citizens and political representatives'. To achieve this, the article begins by discussing the evolution of the notion of direct representation (2005b, 2005c; Coleman and Blumler 2009), providing valuable conceptual insight concerning the affordances and the increased importance of social media in formal politics. The analysis and assessment focus on two aspects of direct representation: the permanent campaign (communication needs to be ongoing rather than episodic), and two-way interaction and communication between citizen and party (the extent to which citizens interact with parties). Larsson's findings reveal citizens are interacting with political parties on Facebook but primarily during elections (which is similar to parties), and this interaction tends come in the form of 'likes' as opposed to dialogue and debate. His findings suggest that it is the smaller parties – as evident in the case of the Swedish Pirate Party – that are adopting elements of direct representation (the permanent campaign) than the larger conventional parties. He concludes by cautioning us not to view the findings here through a negative (or positive) lens but rather we should expect incremental steps, small changes over time. As he states, the longitudinal approach 'has shown how these practices have developed over time, again showing how smaller parties – and especially those whose existence is clearly associated to the medium at hand – are taking the lead'.

In the third contribution, Jakob Svensson, Uta Rußmann and Andaç Baran Cezayirlioğlu conduct a cross-platform comparison between Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter to study whether parties use social media platforms in-between elections and if so, for what purpose. Given that political parties today are present on multiple social media platforms, comparing their use of social media across platforms provides us with a more comprehensive look at their practices (the extent to which they are engaging in direct representation). Their approach is especially significant since, as they point out, most studies have focused on single cases, investigating one platform at a time. According to Coleman's

call for a more 'direct representation', they want to investigate whether parties use social media to interact directly with citizens in non-election periods in Sweden. They randomly select two weeks in early 2016 and can show that direct representation is realized relatively poorly. The interplay of media and politics documents that political parties are election-centric in their social media practices. Instead, in non-election times, most of the parties' followers are supporters or party members. Moreover, the relationship between parties and their followers tends to be one-directional.

Based on the assumption that Twitter is especially important for political communication, in the fourth contribution of the Special Issue, Adrian Rauchfleisch and Julia Metag examine the Twitter activities of Swiss MPs. Through the use of (social) media data and longitudinal design, they examine different types of Twitter use, classifying politicians based on their activity; and they analyse the impact of the traditional media on the Twitter-sphere during non-election periods (when parliament is in session and out of session). Two groups emerge from the findings: active and passive politicians. The so-called 'me-too' users are more passive politicians. Active politicians on Twitter gain more attention on traditional media. However, conversely, this does not work. Only in a few exceptions – when politicians are mentioned in traditional media – they are also mentioned more on Twitter. Twitter attention is therefore rather independent of traditional media attention. If you are active on Twitter, you will get attention. Interestingly, the tonality on Twitter differs between session- and non-session-weeks: There is a positive tonality outside of session weeks and a rather negative tonality during session weeks. This result can be seen as an indicator of the agenda-setting function of the media. The results support the idea that normalization can be observed when taking a look at the activity and Twitter attention of politicians. There is some evidence that Twitter attention depends on both the media attention a politician receives as well as a politicians' social media activity (equalization).

In the fifth contribution, Rebekah Tromble and Karin Koole examine how users communicate on Twitter. Specifically, they want to find out whether there is a gender bias. Against the backdrop that women receive far less news coverage than their male counterparts and on the other hand, are more affected by hate speech on social media in general, the authors expect this also for the Netherlands, UK and the USA. Tromble and Koole ask: Do Twitter-users treat female politicians differently than male politicians? Are the patterns of neglecting female politicians in the mass media mirrored by citizens in an online environment? Do citizens addressing politicians on Twitter direct more criticism and hostility toward women? A mixed approach is used in the study: By use of quantitative regressions, the authors want to find out whether gender is a statistically significant indicator of either attention or tone. By use of qualitative analysis, they inductively develop a typology of negative messages (with seven, non-mutually exclusive categories). Results are surprising: negative expectations are not confirmed for all three case studies. The UK and the US show no gender-differences in the tonality of messages. The tonality of messages in the Netherlands is even more positive when addressed to women.

In the final contribution to this Special Issue, Stephen Coleman once again highlights the importance of shifting to a more *direct* form of representation and how digital communication and information technologies, such as social media, can make this possible. He begins by warning us about the over-representation of wealthy elites in liberal-democracies today and about the growing feeling of distrust and resentment among the public

(resulting from the former). He warns us too that populist leaders draw on these 'deep resentments of exclusion and disrespect' while using digital media to mislead and deceive, persuading large numbers of the electorate. However, as he states, 'the roots of populism […] need not give rise to the kind of anti-democratic politics that trade upon delusions of enhanced popular sovereignty while in reality handing over power to unaccountable demagogues.' How do then we combat this? His answer, of course, is through direct representation: '[…] the immediate need is for a normative commitment to a form of public decision-making that places meaningful and consequential interactive communication at its core.' Coleman then turns to social media and its role in facilitating direct representation. He warns us not to rely on social media companies as it is not simply about building infrastructures of connection. Rather, he points to and discusses the 'democratic capabilities that citizens need to possess if they are to be free to act as confident and efficacious democratic agents.' Coleman then discusses the findings of the contributions to this Special Issue and what these findings mean for direct representation. Finally, the article ends with a research agenda for investigating the potential for direct representation in the digital age, which we encourage scholars to take forward.

Acknowledgements

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[1] See all the Hansard Society's yearly *Audit of Political Engagement* reports at https://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/projects/audit-of-political-engagement.