2. Democratic Potentials of Online Communication for Political Debate

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Abstract: This chapter focuses on the democratization potential of online communication for political debate in Western democracy. We discuss the inclusiveness and democratic potential of online communication in two steps. The first section is devoted to the question of why online communication has fuelled hopes and how empirical studies cast doubt on the democratic potential of the internet. In the second section of the chapter, we propose a new perspective and argue that the internet might be effective as a medium of empowerment and inclusiveness only in interaction with the traditional media. We tackle the notion of a new hybrid media system and claim that political communication research must focus on this zone of interaction between old and new media in order to better understand and realistically assess the democratic potential of the internet.

Keywords: democratic theory, internet, political debate, hybrid media system

Introduction

The democratic potential of online communication for political debate in Western democracy refers to the normative question of whether the internet can make up a better public sphere than traditional mass media. Reflection on this issue started immediately when the internet was introduced. Since then the idea that the internet would generally improve political communication has turned out to be too enthusiastic and also to some degree naïve. Therefore, the discussion of the democratic potential of online media in this chapter shall be narrowed to one specific aspect, namely the aspect of inclusiveness and plurality of voices in mass-mediated public debate.

Inclusiveness and plurality of actors have been of central importance for modern media systems. For instance, one strong criteria for the legitimization, public support and funding of public broadcasting media has always been that these media—if only by their freedom from political and commercial pressures—would feature the issues and opinions of a broad range of societal and political actors. While these norms still inform media laws, it is also true that mass communication research tells us that the selection of issues in the media is determined by professional standards of journalism. These are not guided by the
idea of equal or balanced representation of societal groups but by the objective to reach a particular audience. Limited carrier capacity and the logic of news factors—such as social status, political office, or prominence—are reasons why the traditional media reveal a selection bias, so that elite actors and their issues enjoy privileged media access (e.g. Bennett, 1990). The consequence has been that reality as depicted in mainstream media has been restricted in its representation of standing actors, with the expected consequences for public debate. Mass media's selection bias produces what Gadi Wolfsfeld (1997: 24) called a "cumulative inequality." This means that those who depend the most on voice in the mass media to gain political influence have the most difficult barriers to its entry and access.

Against this background, we discuss whether online media are able to make up for this weakness of traditional media and whether one can expect the internet to be an inclusive medium which offers new opportunities for voice in politics. Thus, the question is whether the internet is challenging traditional mass media-elite linkages by offering those without easy access to public debate new venues for public recognition. If online channels are powerful enough to compensate for cumulative inequality, the internet would yield dramatic changes in contemporary political communication. First, it would threaten the most essential gate-keeping and agenda-setting roles of the traditional mass media. Second, it would change the set of actors and voices in public debate, with obvious consequences for political decision-making and mobilization.

The current chapter sets out to discuss the inclusiveness and democratic potential of online communication in two steps. The first section is devoted to a discussion of why online communication has fuelled hopes and of how empirical studies cast doubt regarding the democratic potential of the internet. In the second section of the paper, we propose a new perspective and argue that the internet may only be effective as a medium of empowerment and inclusiveness in interaction with the traditional media. In this vain Chadwick (2011: 2) recently proposed that the effect of online media has been that a new "hybrid media system" emerged that is "build upon interactions among old and new media and their associated technologies, genres, norms, behaviors and organizations." If this is true however—and this is still an open question—the idea of a mediated public sphere must be reconsidered. We also need to find out whether this hybrid media system produces more openness and inclusiveness with respect to challenging or new actors of public debate and, if so, how. Eventually, political communication research must focus on this zone of interaction between old and new media, if only in order to better understand and more realistically assess the democratic potential of the internet.

**Expectations and empirical disillusion about the democratic potentials of the internet**

Since the public sphere has been dominated by (traditional) mass media, the most pertinent problems of contemporary democracy relate to the inclusiveness of public debate. From a normative point of view the inclusiveness of public debate is a fundamental requirement of democracy. Authors like Jürgen Habermas, Benjamin Barber, Peter Dahlgren or Amatia Etzioni have argued extensively that a wide range of representatives of civil society and actors from the periphery of society need to be included in public debate. This normative claim however has always been in contradiction with the empirically observed "cumulative inequality" of access to media (Wolfsfeld, 1997: 24). Against this background the advent of online communication has fuelled the hope of an increase in the inclusiveness of public communication.

The democratic potential of online media is reflected simultaneously in open access, a seemingly unlimited carrier capacity, the availability of information that previously only journalists could access, and the interactivity and coexistence of horizontal and vertical communication (e.g. Bentivegna, 2002). As a result, online communication must be conceived as an indefinite reservoir of issues and frames which appeals to an undefined but also fragmented public. While the content of online communication bears the enormous capacity to overcome national, geographic and geo-political boundaries, the only remaining barriers are on the side of the user. Online communication—as Neuberger claims (Neuberger, 2009: 39)—threatens the gate-keeping role of traditional mass media. The qualities of the internet allow all kinds of actors to initiate communication and therefore act as potential agenda-setters and frame-builders and bypass the traditional media. For instance, established political actors easily profit from the make-up of the internet. They have the resources to exploit online communication and manage to avoid the filter of media selection (Baringhorst, 2008; Calhoun, 1998; Reithemeyer, 2007). However, as everyone can, in principle, use the Web to address the public, the hope was that previously marginalized actors and arguments gain visibility in public (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010). Therefore, the opportunities of online communication must be particularly important for outsiders and challengers like civil society actors and activists who do not necessarily fit the professional standards and rules of media selection. They are mostly deprived of

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1 Studies on digital divide and media literacy refer to language barriers and social barriers (Marr, 2005; Schenk and Wolf, 2006).
direct access to institutional political decision-making and enjoy fewer opportunities than established actors to gain a voice in traditional media (Pfetsch, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Thus, online communication is particularly important for them (Castells, 2005; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht, 2004). Eventually, their access to the internet could improve the inclusiveness, the deliberativeness and the democratic quality of public debate.

Why does online communication possess such a challenging capacity? The main arguments in the literature refer to its decentralized architecture and the capacity and space for networks of new communicators, issue-centered communication and coalitions (Neuberger, 2009). It is above all these networks which increase peripheral actors’ chances for greater visibility on- and offline (Koopmans and Zimmermann, 2003, 2007). Moreover, online communication provides alternative information and thus challenges the status of traditional media; it offers social movements—on the left and right side of the political spectrum—new possibilities to mobilize and coordinate offline activities (Koopmans and Zimmermann, 2003; Smith, 2000) and these movements have in turn been important in shaping the further development of the internet (de Wilde, 2003). Eventually these sometimes “subterranean” (Wright, 2004:80) channels of communication affect traditional participatory aspects of the political process, in particular when online networks successfully promote permanent campaigns and manage to communicate their ideas, counter-expertise and frames from desktops to offline media (Bennett, 2004).

What does empirical research tell us about the Internet’s capacity to boost the inclusiveness of public debates and thereby challenge the traditional mass media-elite linkage? There are only few studies available that have addressed the question of the inclusiveness and democratization quality of internet communication. The scarce number of empirical studies is comprehensible since it is difficult to delineate what online communication is in the first place. The internet is an endless and multi-layered digital space which hardly lends itself to our empirical study designs. Nor are there easily available research tools and methods of media analysis that apply to the network architecture of the internet.

In order to come to delineate and research the online public sphere, researchers concentrate on issue publics in the internet. For instance Jürgen Gerhards and Mike Schäfer (2010) examine the US and German internet public debate on the issue of human genome research. Rucht, Yang and Zimmermann (2008) study the discourse surrounding the issue of genetically modified food. Ann Zimmermann (2006) concentrates on issues of European politics. All three studies compare online communication with print media coverage and analyze the actors, the framing of issues and arguments and the quality of the debate. With respect to the democratic quality of the debate and the actors the findings are quite sobering. Gerhards and Schäfer (2010, 148) write, “We do not see a more extensive popular inclusion of societal actors, especially civil societal actors, on the web pages. In the internet a small number of actors claim the bulk of standing for themselves, and, in this regard, communication online is even more one-sided than in the print media.”

With respect to the range of argument, the same finding applies in the representation of actors, namely that the framing of political messages in internet communication is “even more one-sided” than in print media. (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010: 153). The claim that the internet features more popular inclusion was neither corroborated in the study of the food issue nor in the investigation of European politics. According to Ann Zimmermann (2006) the working of search engines is responsible for the hierarchical structure of online debate. Search engines direct attention almost as hierarchically as in newspapers. One of the consequences is that “Civil society actors are systematically discriminated against as compared to governmental actors. […] The online communication is not more democratic than traditional mass media.”

To conclude, the hints of criticism with respect to the democratic promises of the internet clearly prevail. It seems that the online public sphere is subject to similar power structures as offline media, at least from a user’s perspective that strongly relies on the working of search engines to find relevant information on the web (Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010; Rucht, 2004; Rucht, Yang, and Zimmermann, 2008; Zimmermann and Koopmans, 2010).

The internet might not be successful in making the nature of public debate more inclusive and as a result more democratic from the perspective of a classical online user relying on the workings of search machines. Yet its enormous capacities for allowing all kinds of actors to communicate their ideas and form coalitions with allies might still be capable of changing political communication dramatically. First, online communication has the potential to successfully promote campaigns (e.g. the Occupy Movement) and thereby mobilize citizens whose activities are then taken up by traditional mass media. Second, online communication allows those who go beyond a simple Google search to dig for new and alternative information by using the abundance of online information available. Thereby, this abundance of online information might be especially important for journalists of traditional mass media. From this perspective, online communication may unfold its full democratic potential not against traditional media but with them: online and offline debates might reverberate and resonate with each other. If this is the case, we need to focus our attention on the space and the mechanism of interaction between online and offline communication. Consequently, the critical link regarding the impact of the internet on political
communication relates to the interplay and dynamics of online and offline communication.

The interplay between online and offline media leads to a “hybrid media system” which is “built upon interactions among old and new media” in contemporary politics and society (Chadwick, 2011: 2). In his recent work, Andrew Chadwick elaborates on this idea of a hybrid media regime and applies it to cases of political communication that transgress boundaries that were formerly clearly delineated such as those, for instance, between formats (like entertainment and information), but also and most importantly between old and new media. Hybridization is seen as a process of both integration and fragmentation in communication. But the hybrid media system is mainly considered as the “outcome of power struggles and competition for prominence during periods of unusual transition, contingency, and negotiability” (Chadwick, 2011: 10). Thus, the approach of hybridity claims to “shed new light on the relative power of actors in media systems. Attempts to control, police, and redraw boundaries, and the power struggles that crisscross domains are now defining features of political communication” (Chadwick, 2011: 10).

An example of the development of hybrid media systems is the British “bullying” scandal, which refers to the media hype against the British premier Brown after the revelation of a then unpublished book about his conduct with personnel in his office. Another example Chadwick provides is the advent of Nick Clegg in UK politics after the debate in the election campaign of 2010. The most telling case, however, is that of the publication of Wikileaks documents and the debate over the behavior of Julian Assange. This communication involved civil rights activists, traditional media and the highest public officials in the US and UK. In all these cases real time news frames were mobilized and supplemented and eventually became the subject of fierce contestation between members of the press or broadcast media and online activists organized in social networks such as Twitter. All the cases from the UK share one feature: the participants of the communication are...

“(….) composed of multiple, loosely-coupled individuals, groups, sites, and temporal instances of interaction involving diverse yet highly interdependent news creators that plug and unplug themselves from the news-making process, often in real time…. They include many non-elite participants, most of whom now interact exclusively online in order to advance or contest news frames and fragments of information, sometimes in real-time exchanges but also during subsequent stages of the cycle of news that follows a major political event or the breaking of a story.” (Chadwick 2011: 15)

Another feature of the hybrid media system is that the traditional media make use of the communication in the internet for their own commercial and political purposes. Thus, what we see is that press and television and their online branches work together and develop their own genuine production routines and practices.

If we acknowledge that there is evidence for an emerging hybrid media system, we need to focus our attention on research about the spillover processes between online and offline media and their consequences (e.g. Zhou and Moy, 2007). Against this background the mechanisms of interaction and in particular the conditions and the nature of spillover processes of issues and frames between old and new media become a central research topic. Studies that systematically analyze the linkage between online communication and offline media are rare. The bulk of research here focuses on how traditional mass media set the issues and frames for online channels. The studies demonstrate that the old media are important agenda-setters for online blogs and other platforms. In their study of more than 90 million articles on political issues online, Leskovec et al. (Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg, 2009) find “that about 3.5% of quoted phrases tend to percolate from blogs to news media, while diffusion in the other direction is much more common.” Other studies corroborate that offline-online agenda setting predominates (Ku, Kaid, and Pfau, 2003; Oegema, Kleinnijenhuis, Anderson, and Hoof, 2008).

However, from the point of view of democratic theory spillovers in the other direction are more significant. They allow us to understand under which conditions online communication actually lives up to its democratic potential. Thus, spillovers from the internet into traditional mass media are more conducive for the inclusiveness and participatory nature of public debate. Three types of spillover are particularly interesting:

- First, direct spillovers occur when messages from challengers’ online networks are selected by journalists of the traditional media. As Baringhorst (2008) points out, this flow of communication is a viable strategy for challengers and in their eyes bears an enormous increase of access to the public. As Chadwick (2011) shows, in the hybrid media system, the traditional media deliberately use the information provided by challengers on the internet.
- Second, another type of spillover occurs when online outlets of the traditional media (e.g. Spiegel-online) or specialized online media (such as Huffington Post) get involved with challengers’ online coalitions and online issue networks and feature their issues and frames. If these issues and frames are then taken up by the offline editions, we can speak of a double media-focused spillover in the sense of the paradigm of the two-step flow of communication in media effects research. The case of Wikileaks may serve as a good example here, as prominent online news platforms, such as Spiegel online in Germany or the Guardian in the UK or the New York Times in the USA, were in a symbiotic relationship with Wikileaks (Chadwick, 2011: 23-24).
Third, spillovers from online to offline media might work via a campaign's mobilization of citizens. In this double campaign-focused spillover, a challengers' online coalition mobilizes citizens whose actions are then taken up by traditional mass media. The cases of the Occupy Movement or also the Arab revolution may serve as examples.

What do we know from political communication research about these spillover processes and what does it say about the democratic potential of the internet? There are a number of studies that focus on the role of individual actors such as the so-called 'netizens' who are active in blogs, fora or social networks. Their aim is indeed to trigger spillovers into traditional media (Fuchs, 2007; Matzat, 2005; Mesch, 2007; Piotrowski, 2006). Particularly interesting is the work by Zhou and Moy (2007) who show that online discourse has an agenda- and frame-building effect on media reporting. This effect appears above all in latent stages of an issue's course. Zhou and Moy (2007) and also Peng (2005) not only find spillovers and thus changes in political communication modes but also link these spillovers to political change. In the case of post-Mao China, online fora have challenged the authority and the political agenda of the government (Yu, 2006; Zhou and Moy 2007). Similarly Lee (2005) shows for Korea that online fora provoked an online, public, counter sphere, but more importantly fed into offline protest movements. The same arguments have been made about the role of online media in the revolutions in the Middle East such as the one in Egypt. Thus, spillovers from the net improve the democratic deficits of traditional media—particularly in countries where media freedom is severely restricted.

A study on Israel, however, does not support this view nor the idea of a hybrid media system. Vaisman (2009) contradicts the view that online communication—namely Hebrew left-wing blogs—affect traditional mass media. Unlike most American political blogs, which subscribe to norms of mainstream journalism, Israeli political blogs challenge mainstream journalism and as a consequence are largely ignored by it. Instead, blogs respond to the exclusion from coverage by bypassing the media and seeking direct access to politicians to generate public action.

A second strand of research refers to collective actors in the movement sector and their involvement in spillover processes. The few studies available demonstrate that challengers treat online communication as an important instrument within their action repertoire (Baringhorst, Kneip, and Niesyto 2007; Gillan, 2009; Lester and Hutchins, 2009; Richards and Heard, 2005). Research becomes sparse when we seek to understand the link between challengers' online campaigns and the traditional mass media. Lester and Hutchins (2009), in their study of an environmental campaign in the UK, find that the spillover from online to traditional media was a purposely planned and successful political strategy. Thus the spill over from online media to offline media pushed the issue onto the national political agenda. The strategy used the traditional media's power in political communication to provoke political change.

These studies indicate that in fact the interaction between old and new media, traditional press and the internet, produces an interesting new communication phenomenon with profound political consequences for politics and for the nature and quality of democracy and public debate. However, as charming the idea of a hybrid media system is, major questions about the mechanisms and conditions of spillovers and the political consequences thereof have yet to be researched.

Conclusion

Regarding the democratic potential of online communication, we have to cast doubts on the general assumption that the internet as such leads automatically to a broadening of the range of participants, issues, frames and arguments as well as to a better quality of political communication and public debate. Instead, from the few studies available we infer that the internet is reproducing the power structures that prevail in traditional media. However, we also see that the internet provokes fundamental changes in public sphere and in political communication insofar as the new media together with old media build up new structural communication networks which may be labeled a "hybrid media system". The interaction leading to the rise of this emerging communication structure involves outsiders who challenge the political elite as well as less tightly coupled groups and sites. The mechanisms of agenda building are spillovers between the online and offline media. In this respect online communication triggers completely new structures of political exchange and may indeed fulfill hopes for more inclusive, democratic public discourse. However, the hybrid public sphere may not automatically equal an enlightened debate. The hybrid media system may also be
used for populist or unfair mobilization, for instance when the right wing or tabloid press jumps on campaigns on the internet.

The conclusion is that the hybrid media system has not yet been researched closely enough and has become a task for contemporary and future political communication research. We should particularly devote our attention to the nature and variety of spillover effects and the mechanisms and conditions of interaction between old and new media and their consequences. However, since the analysis of the hybrid media system and particularly the interaction of online and offline media requires innovative research design and rather complex and complicated methodological approaches, the task will be a rather demanding challenge.

References


2. Democratic Potentials of Online Communication for Political Debate


3. Mediating Politics in Scotland: Information and Ideology

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Abstract: Much of the research in the field of political communication rests on foundational assumptions about how attitudes and behaviours relate to one another. Research that examines variation in political attitudes often presumes that they drive key behaviours such as voting patterns. This is often manifested through attempts to explain attitude variation through communication exposure and attention variables, as in research on media framing, or through the overall tone and content of political communication. This chapter seeks to problematize this linkage through an examination of a set of exemplars of political communication in the news media that exploits web-based interfaces. These are primarily drawn from BBC webpages because of the authoritative nature of this broadcaster in the UK and its in-depth coverage of Scottish politics. The aim is to provide a critique of cognitive approaches to political communication by considering the growth of this form of communication as part of a wider ideological association with neo-liberalism in which the individual is thought to access ‘information’ through various new media as the basis for action.

Keywords: opinion polling, web-based interfaces, news, attitudes, ideology

Introduction

It is evident that internet-based communication is transforming the political communication landscape. One issue that is of interest is the extent to which audiences engage with new media in understanding and evaluating political communication. This is particularly the case with respect to the treatment of politics as information within the news media. It is often the case that the treatment of politics here is one of communication that aids in the shaping of political attitudes and opinions. However, the link between forms of political communication such as, for example, blogs and tweets, and their persuasive effect in changing attitudes and opinions, is difficult to assess. Bull sums this up when he states, “Analysis of the major dimensions of traditional persuasive communication research—message source, message characteristics, message, receivers, and cognitive models of persuasion—would benefit greatly from the application of techniques used in the study of political language” (Bull, 2007: 273).

This is a laudable aim in that it yields new insights into how such communication ‘works’. However, the study of political communication as cognition and persuasion can easily ignore ideological issues, and in particular the neo-liberal focus on the individual who is the subject of such communication. The atomism that can be argued to occur when politics is considered in such terms is oculcled in the attempt to ‘inform’ the public.