

Conceptualising digital politics

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Power is ubiquitous. People have power over us. We resist power. We exercise power. We complain about the relations of power in which we find ourselves caught up. We collude with power, as if it were a natural force. We stand up to power. We surrender to power. We feel powerful. We feel impotent. Even those who claim to be non-political are engaging in these relationships and experiencing these feelings on a regular basis.

Politics is the organising dimension of power. It is the language we use for naming and talking about power; the rules we observe in exercising and submitting to power; the sighs, gestures and half-formed sentences we give off in our daily encounters with the structures and routines of power. Politics is not just about what governments do or politicians say. Sometimes the political is deeply embedded in constitutional and institutional protocols; at other times it simmers under the surface, shaping and affecting relations, while co-existing with other cultural dynamics.

It would be difficult to imagine how a development as world-changing as the emergence of the Internet could have taken place without having some impact upon the ways in which politics is expressed, conducted, depicted and reflected upon. It is one thing to say that politics is affected by digital communication. It is quite another thing to say that digital communication fundamentally reshapes politics. The truth lies somewhere between those two statements and the way of getting at that truth is through rigorous, empirical research rather than starry-eyed speculation.

To speak of digital politics is not simply to tell a story about how political routines are replicated online. One feature of all technologies is that they are

constitutive: they do not simply support predetermined courses of action, but open up new spaces of action, often contrary to the original intentions of inventors and sponsors. Not only hard technologies, but modes of technical thought, have had profound effects upon governmental strategies. For example, the emergence of the printing press in Europe generated a space in which publics could come together as cohabitants of imagined communities; centralised states could disseminate their propaganda to mass populations; and vernacular idioms and dialects could be systematised into official languages. As Benedict Anderson argued in his study of the rise of nationhood, ‘the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.’ (Anderson, 1983) Because technologies are not simply employed to replicate power relationships, but play a constitutive role in establishing them, it makes sense to think of ‘digital politics’ less as an account of how technology serves predetermined political ends than as a complex, ongoing tension between replication and transformation in the social organisation of power. Rather than thinking of technology *doing something to* politics (which, despite non-technological-determinist protestations, still pervades much of the literature), we might think about politics itself as a technology. At the end of the Seventeenth Century, John Trenchard (1698) argued that ‘a government is a mere piece of clockwork, and having such springs and wheels, must act after such a manner: and there the art is to constitute it so that it must move to the public advantage.’ To speak metaphorically of the *machinery* of government, political *leaks* and *re-engineering* government is to tacitly acknowledge that Trenchard was right and governance is best can profitably be understood as a technology. In that sense, this volume is concerned with how one technology (the political process) is affected by another technology (digital forms of producing and circulating information and communication). Each of these technologies is entangled in the history of the other in a constantly reciprocal interplay between structural logic and human reflexivity. Orlikowski (1992:406) summarises this complexity well when she states that

technology is physically constructed by actors working within a given social context, and technology is socially constructed by actors through the different meanings they attach to it and the various features they emphasise and use. However, it is also the case that once developed and deployed, technology tends to become reified and institutionalized, losing its connection with the human agents that constructed it or gave it meaning, and it appears to be part of the objective, structural properties of the organization.

This volume is largely about how digital politics has been constructed by actors who are motivated by competing meanings and practices and how it has become, on the one hand, reified and institutionalised, and on the other, subversive and transformative. These tensions between maintenance and disruption play out differently for parties to political communication depending upon where they are situated. Political elites might regard digital politics as an opportunity to cut out the critical scrutiny of journalists and appeal directly to the public, but also as a risk because the spread of news sources, discursive spaces and surveillance technologies makes them more visible and vulnerable. Journalists might see the digital mediation of politics as unwelcome competition to their role as authoritative storytellers and gatekeepers, but are increasingly turning to online sources and platforms in order to find ways of sustaining their social role and economic future. Citizens might see digital politics as the same old messages as before, now invading their inboxes and phones; or as entry points to collective – or connective – action that reduces communicative inequalities between the poorest, most dispersed and traditional power elites. In short, generalisations about digital politics as either threat to democracy or political panacea have long outlived whatever usefulness they may have once possessed. As with most historical developments, the significance of these relatively recent innovations in political communication depends upon where one happens to be standing and how one is looking.

In trying to make sense of digital politics and its implications for the broader communication environment, this volume is less interested in making

sweeping claims or generalisations than in offering carefully-researched observations about what has been going on; what these changes and continuities might mean for political communication in general; and, most importantly, what we do not yet know and need to find new ways of researching. In short, we are less interested here in offering the final, definitive word than reporting new and original insights and contributing to an agenda for future research and debate.

A changing political communication environment

For most of the past century, the dominant model of political communication focused upon a relationship between politicians, as message-generators and agenda-setters, and journalists, as gatekeepers and message disseminators. As Blumler and Gurevitch (1999:12) put it,

... if we look at a political communication system, what we see is two sets of institutions – political and media organizations – which are involved in the course of message preparation in much ‘horizontal’ interaction with each other, while, on a ‘vertical’ axis, they are separately and jointly engaged in disseminating and processing information and ideas to and from the mass citizenry.

This model remains relevant, but is no longer as stable or insulated as it once was. While political and media organizations remain key players in the circulation of information and ideas, both the independence and interdependence of their roles are changing. In terms of their independent functions as shapers of dominant political narratives, political institutions (such as governments, legislatures and parties) are facing difficulties in commanding public attention, generating authoritative and trusted messages and competing with other sources of civically-rooted agenda-setting. At the same time, the mass media are competing to address a diminishing and ever-fragmenting audience comprising people who can access political information from a variety of sources and no longer regard conventional political narratives as being worthy of dutiful attention. The cosy interdependence between politicians and the media in regard to the preparation of messages of

which Blumler and Gurevitch wrote – perceived by many to be a kind of ‘establishment’ collusion – has been radically interrupted by grass-root articulations of public interests and values that might not in the past have penetrated the mass-media agenda, but now simmer and circulate within and across digital networks. Proponents of the so-called ‘normalisation’ thesis argue that none of this destabilisation fundamentally changes the systemic logic of elite-driven political communication, which is largely replicated online. A contrasting perspective, sometimes referred to as the ‘mobilization’ thesis, is based on evidence that the politician-media relationship is weakened by the emergence of grass-roots networks that reconfigure the terms of publicness. Normalisation theorists are in danger of holding on to an established model of political communication without regard to its inadequacy for explaining manifest empirical changes in the production and circulation of political ideas. Mobilization theorists sometimes exaggerate the force of these changes by failing to distinguish between contextual and general trends.

But there are some general trends that can be identified as characteristic features of an emerging digital political communication environment. Let us attempt to outline five of them:

Firstly, a range of political sources, platforms, channels and formats now make it almost impossible for any one political voice to claim overarching authority or to hope to reach most of the public. Compared with times not so long ago when families gathered around the radio and later television to receive ‘the news’, it is clear that the consumption of political information is now coming from a multitude of directions and at all hours of the day and night. Whereas in the past, audiences for political information tended to deliberately seek it out at set times of the day, it is now much more likely for such messages to be encountered inadvertently. While it is still possible for Presidents and Prime Ministers to issue grand statements at times of national and global crisis or celebration, in the knowledge that they will be delivered by the mainstream media to a mass audience, for most of the time political elites have to compete in a highly dispersed and noisy space to win public attention. Consider for example recent changes to the rhythm and routine of election

campaigns. Reaching 'the electorate' involves a combination of communication techniques, from personalised appeals to voters' phones and inboxes to mass-media packages, often disguised in the form of non-political genres (Kreiss, this volume). Resource-poor citizens and communities seeking to put pressure on governments or corporations were in the past confined to a limited, localised repertoire of actions, whereas now they can utilise digital networks to amplify their own voices and link to others with similar values (Graham; Kim & Amna; Shah et al.; Wells et al.; Wright, this volume). So, a first general point to be made about the new political communication environment is that it is much harder to capture or manage; it is more porous and fragmented; it is antithetical to the final word on any subject.

Secondly, the predominantly vertical and linear pathways that characterised political communication in the mass-media era are under increasing challenge from the emergence of horizontal networks that allow citizens to evade institutional structures and processes. In some cases (but by no means all), such networks undermine the authority that political elites once enjoyed and diminish the role of mediating interpretation by journalists (Anstead & O'Loughlin; Bruns & Highfield; Couldry, this volume). In digital environments people come to know about one another in real-time and asynchronously. Politically, this makes coordination for collective action much less cumbersome than it was in the past. Political mobilisation becomes a matter of mutual visibility (Bennett & Segerberg, this volume). The agenda-setting and gatekeeping functions that characterised the traditional political communication system are inadequate for the role of managing the circulation of messages, memes and sentiments in the much more fluid digital environment. Established political institutions are under pressure, therefore, to relate to and even replicate this communicative fluidity. Often, their response is to adopt the cosmetic features of horizontal circulation while maintaining the structural logic of vertical message-management (Kreiss, this volume). This is a tension that is played out with increasingly problematic consequences and has led to much soul-searching on the part of institutional communication strategists.

Thirdly, a key imaginary of the traditional political communication system – the audience – is no longer what it once seemed to be. Increasing numbers of people find themselves engaged simultaneously as mass-media consumers and as peer-to-peer message producers—sometimes literally at the same time (Anstead & O’Loughlin, this volume). As horizontal media interactivity practices compete with traditional practices of viewing and listening in, distinctions between audiences and publics are no longer sustainable. People who have their own stake in the production and flow of media content cannot be depended upon to be guided or managed in their perceptions of or relationships to social power. While mass-media reception never did entail an inert and passive relationship, it was clearly based upon two assumptions: that a privileged group of well-resourced media-makers would generate and transmit most of the content; and that audiences, however active in their interpretations or responses to such content, would not play a significant feedback role in relation to content originators. In short, mass media was mainly monological. In contrast, digital communication resists the logic of what Postman has called ‘the one-way conversation.’ (Postman, 1986). The default setting for digital media is that messages sent or received are only one part of an ongoing process of sense-making. Consider traditional televised appeals by politicians to voters. The audience/electorate was conceived as a sitting target. It could accept or reject the messages addressed to it, but had nothing like the options for challenging, reformulating or destabilising the message that is afforded by digital media. So, just as multi-platform media makes it hard for political elites (or anyone else) to have the final word, it is also the case that the logic of media interactivity has potential to weaken strategies of argumentative closure and evens out the right to make public claims (Bennett & Segerberg; Bruns & Highfield, this volume). On the other hand, this potential is not evenly distributed: empirical research on the matter has repeatedly shown that online participation (especially in political matters) tends to be dominated by the better-off (Schradié, this volume).

Fourthly, what we might call the expressive tone of political communication has become in recent years less constrained by the generic features of official

politics. The formal conventions of political interaction that dominated ritual events such as broadcast interviews, expert commentary panels and televised election debates have come to be regarded by many people as stage-managed, self-referential and frequently incomprehensible. A common response to this tendency was noted by Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) in their analysis of ‘the third age of political communication’:

Politicians are impelled to speak in a more popular idiom and to court popular support more assiduously. Media organizations are driven to seek ways of making politics more palatable and acceptable to audience members.

Blumler and Kavanagh’s astute observation referred mainly to a broadcast culture in which political and journalistic elites felt under intensifying pressure to pander to audiences that were disinclined to respond deferentially to voices of authority. With the emergence of the Internet as a public space for reflecting and talking about politics (alongside and entangled within a range of other subjects), political discourse has become more vernacular and inclusive and discourse norms that once made it apparently easy to distinguish between political and everyday discussion have become blurred (Dutton & Dubois; Shah et al., this volume). The viral circulation of jokes, images, short comments, ironic pastiches and shared sentiments has become a significant component of contemporary political communication (Xenos, this volume). In the digital environment, it is not simply a matter of politicians needing to acknowledge the popular framing of politics, but of such reframing opening up space for hitherto under-articulated policy debates – especially those relating to the intersections of private and public morality – and closing down opportunities for other well-established strategies, such as private negotiation; the suppression of bad news that is likely to affect social behaviour and exacerbate unwanted outcomes; or the maintenance of clear lines between personal and public personas.

Fifthly, while the traditional political-communication pyramid was open to forms of regulation, the digital environment is not only largely lawless, but

seemingly invulnerable to strong legal regulation. Laws responding to offensive, defamatory or abusive content are extremely difficult to conceive or enforce in an environment where communication flows often bear no relation to the boundaries of individual nation-states. One of the effects of globalisation is that the free movement of symbolic resources can be as unaccountably and recklessly unbounded as the unchecked movement of capital. This, of course, is one of the great democratic strengths of digital politics, especially in the contexts of political regimes that hitherto found it relatively easy to maintain an authoritarian grip on the flow of public information and discussion. The creation of transnational alliances of jointly-affected citizens has often served an important agenda-setting and mobilising function. At the same time, digital connectivity has strengthened a number of highly undemocratic and destructive movements, often depending upon the unaccountability of their messages to perpetuate vile forms of hate speech. As well as such stark abuses of digital political communication, the absence of regulation has opened spaces for corporate interventions in the public sphere, leaving vast numbers of people who engage in political discussion via social-media sites vulnerable to commercial surveillance and even attempts to manipulate their personal information environments (Moss; Fuchs, this volume).

How this book explores changes and continuities in digital politics

This volume is divided into seven multi-chapter sections, each of which represents a highly active research agenda in digital politics. These sections are not exhaustive—there are surely a few areas we have missed—but we believe they collectively offer a wide-ranging impression of the field's most pressing concerns. The remainder of this chapter describes each section, briefly summarizing each of its constituent chapters.

Theorizing digital politics

The chapters in this section grapple with very broad theoretical issues held in common across many strands of digital politics research. Rather than reviewing empirical findings in detail, as most of the other sections do, these chapters review and compare competing theoretical perspectives and present

their own arguments concerning the best paths forward for research. Peter Dahlgren discusses the role of the Internet in altering an existing field of “civic spaces” available to citizens to discuss and engage with politics. His overarching finding is that the Internet’s relationship to politics resists succinct summary, and that his notion of “civic cultures” can help disaggregate the different levels at which the Internet influences politics. Nick Couldry focuses on how digital media react with “the social foundations of political engagement and political action” (p. X) to alter political opportunity structures. In doing so, he stresses the importance of specific questions concerning how digital media may change *who* can participate in politics, *what* they can do, and *why*. Bill Dutton and Elizabeth Dubois develop a concept they call the Fifth Estate, which refers to uses of the Internet to hold powerful institutions and individuals publicly accountable. In contrast to the Fourth Estate of traditional journalists, the Fifth Estate maintains no professional barriers to entry—anyone can join quickly and easily on an ad-hoc basis using widely-available tools. And in a provocative departure from the other chapters in this section, Jen Schradie argues that “structural inequalities in the United States create virtual poll taxes for those who do not control the means of digital production in online political spaces” (p. X). Thus online politics, like offline politics, comes to be dominated by elite voices and priorities.

Government and policy

This section is devoted to research on the roles played by digital media in various aspects of state governance, with each chapter focusing on a distinct governmental function. Fadi Hirzalla and Liesbet Van Zoonen review research on voting advice applications (VAAs), which help voters decide which political parties to support based on their policy preferences. They focus on three key questions: VAAs’ effects on the electoral system, their users’ demographics, and how exactly VAAs translate voter input into actionable suggestions. Along very similar lines, Thad Hall examines the literature on Internet voting, which promises to lower barriers to democratic participation even as its security risks threaten to limit widespread adoption. The chapter focuses on these dual issues of access and security, ultimately concluding that the current dearth of robust infrastructure will sharply limit the technology’s near-term applications.

Shifting from voting to soliciting votes, Daniel Kreiss reviews recent work on US presidential campaigns' uses of the Internet and digital media. He finds that many digital tools have already become integrated into long-standing campaign practices, in particular having dramatically amplified and accelerated campaigns' interactions with voters. But citizen/government communication can be bottom-up as well as top-down, and Scott Wright's chapter focuses on e-petitions, an increasingly popular means of aggregating and communicating support for grassroots policy changes. Taking an international approach, Wright considers who controls e-petitions' agendas, their actual impact on government policies, and the representativeness of their participant base. Neil Benn concludes this section with a look at the cutting edge of research on computer-supported argument visualization (CSAV) technology in the specific context of policy deliberation. This chapter helpfully explains the priorities that have historically driven CSAV development and also profiles some of the most prominent CSAV platforms and their outcomes.

Collective action and civic engagement

Departing from the realm of officially sanctioned citizen/government interaction, the chapters in this section examine the potential for digital tools to help (and at times, hinder) independent collective action and engagement. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg begin with a convenient chapter-length summary of their "logic of connective action" thesis, which updates the well-known logic of collective action for the digital age. In it they outline their three ideal types of contemporary connective action, which are differentiated by the centrality of digital media, and demonstrate how recent protest cases exemplify each. A more fully-realized version of this argument can be found in their recent book *The Logic of Connective Action* (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). The following two chapters focus on youth civic engagement and politics, albeit in different ways. Chris Wells, Emily Vraga, Kjerstin Thorson, Stephanie Edgerly, and Leticia Bode review six distinct focus areas of the literature on youth civic engagement. In doing so, they provide a comprehensive and high-level overview of the topics of greatest concern to

the field. Kim and Amna's chapter overlaps slightly with Wells et al.'s, but whereas Wells et al. focus primarily on US-focused research, Kim and Amna's literature review is much more international in scope. Moreover, Kim and Amna present a unique empirical illustration of some of the key points drawn from their own research of Swedish adolescents, further distinguishing an already thoughtful chapter.

Political talk

Political conversation between citizens has been a fixture of political communication research for decades, but its transition to the digital realm presents a host of theoretical and methodological challenges. The chapters in this section address these challenges from a variety of perspectives. Todd Graham's contribution starts with a much-needed defense of the study of online political talk, which can seem to the lay observer as a distraction from "real" political communication. From there, he proceeds to outline the main themes of online political talk, including its responsiveness, discursive quality, and opinion diversity. He concludes by briefly sketching an agenda for future research that focuses on under-studied areas. Christopher Birchall and Stephen Coleman's chapter begins by considering the rationale for online deliberation and goes on to set out some key factors likely to determine deliberative quality. They discuss a number of tools that have been developed to facilitate online deliberation and conclude by asking what further research is needed to advance the deliberative agenda. Shah and colleagues profile a very exciting and relatively new frontier for forms of research discussed in this section: the use of computational methods to study online political talk. After tracing the theoretical warrant for this research back to pioneering social interactionist Gabriel Tarde, they present their own original computational analysis of Twitter conversations about the high-profile Sandra Fluke and Trayvon Martin news stories. This chapter is especially noteworthy for the way it combines a cogent theoretical framework and advanced computational methods—such unions are unfortunately fairly rare as of this writing. Nick Anstead and Ben O'Loughlin's chapter finishes the section with a similarly cutting-edge review of research on "two-screen politics," wherein viewers

simultaneously watch a television program while posting content about it to the Internet. The authors devote most of the chapter to reconciling preexisting political communication theory with two-screen politics, whose popularity has grown steadily over the past few years. In particular, they dwell at some length on the implications of two-screening for deliberative democracy, hybrid media, and networked power.

Journalism

While journalism is well-known as a distinct domain from digital politics, the two are more closely related than the empirical record would suggest. News is, after all, the medium through which most of us learn about political matters. Thus, in the spirit of encouraging more cross-pollination of theory and methods between the two subdisciplines, we present three chapters focusing on topics of particular interest to their shared intellectual borders. In the first, Axel Bruns and Tim Highfield apply the theories of gatewatching and collaborative news production to the phenomena of news blogging and curation. Their review of related research reveals that the online news production/consumption cycle is not a hermetic echo chamber as many contend, but rather a complex series of interconnections between parties of varying political preferences and levels of professionalism. Next, Michael Xenos shifts the focus from participatory online media to a newer genre of traditional media: political comedy and entertainment. Xenos advances a compelling argument for the relevance of this genre—sometimes derided as politically inconsequential by hard-news producers—and demonstrates its strong connection with digital politics. Much of the chapter is devoted to reviewing the various kinds of effects political entertainment has been observed to exercise on consumers. Finally, Neil Thurman presents an overview of journalistic gatekeeping in the digital age with a strong emphasis on his own work on the topic.

Internet Governance

In contrast to most of this volume's sections, the topic of Internet governance pertains not to matters of politics and government as typically understood, but to decisions about how the Internet itself will operate and who will own its

various components. Our two contributors examine distinct aspects of Internet governance, both of whose implications are international in scope. Giles Moss offers an overview of the concept, distinguishing principally among the distinct functions of “policymaking,” “regulation,” and “governance.” Moss gives a succinct and accessible overview of some of the major areas of controversy in Internet governance, including libertarian optimism, the power of regulation through code, and the deontology of Internet use. At a more concrete level of analysis, Christian Fuchs assesses the state of research on online surveillance and privacy, with a particular focus on social media. The power to peer directly into citizens’ private lives is an aspect of Internet governance exploited by both democratic and despotic governments, and its relevance to digital politics is manifest. In his chapter, Fuchs explores both the technical details of social media surveillance as well as its economic, political, and cultural implications.

Expanding the frontiers of digital politics research

This volume’s final section presents three chapters that look forward to areas of digital politics research that are currently understudied but have substantial growth potential. It is a heterogeneous group, but all make similar attempts to come to grips with types of data that defy traditional research methods. Katy Parry’s chapter takes on the task of reviewing research that examines visual political content online. Of course the history of visual political communication research stretches back decades, but as with most of this book’s topics, the emergence of digital communication has occasioned new theoretical and methodological challenges. Dividing her analysis between top-down and bottom-up politics, Parry advocates for a distinct “visual culture studies” approach that recognizes the unique political power of visual media. Taking a more method-driven approach, Ross Petchler and Sandra Gonzalez-Bailon explore popular techniques of automated text analysis such as lexicon-based analysis, unsupervised learning, sentiment analysis, and network analysis. Their chapter is written specifically for a digital politics research audience, and most of the research they cite was chosen to demonstrate these methods’ relevance for that audience. Along similar lines, Deen Freelon continues the focus on computational research methods by reviewing digital politics studies

from an unlikely source: a field called *social computing* populated primarily by computer scientists and information scientists. Although they operate under a very different set of research quality criteria than social scientists, their programming-based methods open a plethora of possibilities for adventurous digital politics researchers.