

Can Social Media Help Develop Politically Active Global Communities?

Written by Britta Baumgarten

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BRITTA BAUMGARTEN, MAY 16 2017

Social media is currently discussed as a tool to support wider and more democratic political participation. A very interesting aspect here is the question in how far such tools improve global political participation. Regarding this question Mark Zuckerberg published the manifesto “Building Global Community” at the beginning of this year. He has an optimistic view on this question, believing in the power of technical solutions: “In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us” (Zuckerberg, 2017). Times like these are not favourable for traditional forms of political participation: voting and participation in institutions, like the traditional political parties, the trade unions or associations, have declined in most Western countries. Political participation has become more individualized and there is less commitment to long-term political projects. This poses new problems of how to secure social cohesion and democratic decision making processes. At the global level, we observe that institutionalized politics often fail to resolve pressing problems. Furthermore, national governments have lost impact and are challenged by global actors that are often not democratically elected (Crouch, 2004; Risse, 2013). Political participation of citizens – either in form of invited publics or social movements, is discussed as a way to improve democracy and tackle global problems in a different way (Della Porta, 2013). In the following article, I will first take a look at the relationship between social media and political participation in general and in a second step focus on the use of social media for social movements.

Can Social Media Help to Increase Political Participation?

Let us take a look at recent research results on social media and political participation. A study by Zhu and Pang (2016) based on 22 cases of media use and participation suggests that there is a positive relationship between social media use and engagement. But this relationship depends on the way social media is used: it is especially those people who use social media primarily to gain information that are politically engaged, while identity and entertainment oriented use does not support engagement (Skoric et al., 2016). The main motivation to join Facebook communities, however, is to socialize and build up reputation amongst peers (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2016: 24). This should warn us not to be too optimistic about Facebook as a tool for political participation.

Information can be shared more quickly via the Internet and communicating political messages is not a question of financial resources or gate keeping of mass media anymore. This can lead to the rise of interest in specific cases and reliable other sources, like mass media or police information, but it also leads to a communication overload and the increased share of information that is not true. More than ever before we are forced to select messages. As a result, people focus “on short-term ‘event-based’ loyalties rather than longer term ‘interest-based political affiliation’” (Couldry, 2014: 616). There is evidence of diminished long-term engagement for a cause or a political group and consequently less stability in political socialization” (Couldry, 2014: 608). This signals that there is a problem with long-term commitment related to internet-based political participation.

So people get more information about what is happening in other parts of the world and there are more opportunities to engage with a cause – in many cases without requiring one to dedicate too much time to it. But there is less time for stable communities or institutions where people discuss political issues and develop their own ideas and

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positions. Most people on the internet thus limit their political participation to support causes that others propose to them, without greater debate on the causes. “[T]he internet enhances political activeness of existing participants rather than attracting new participants” (Nam, 2012: 95).

Building a Global Community that Leaves Nobody Behind

If we are interested in building a global community that leaves nobody behind, as Zuckerberg called it, we have to consider who is using social media for which purpose. It is moreover interesting to see how people connect. For a democratic debate, it would be good to bring together a wide variety of opinions. The Occupy and Indignados movements for example promoted this idea by organizing public assemblies where people met on the streets and everybody had the chance to express their views (Dhaliwal, 2012).

Participation at public assemblies is restricted by time and space, but on Facebook participation depends on other factors. People do not pass by and stop to follow a debate. Instead, groups and events are proposed by friends, an active search for a group or by Facebook based on other events and issues the user was interested in. As a consequence, it is easier to find people that are in a similar situation, such as the example Zuckerberg mentioned in his manifesto of a woman with a rare disorder finding others worldwide that suffer from the same disease. So here we have new opportunities to get together, exchange information and help each other. But the way we connect with groups on Facebook and build up our networks leads rather to finding people similar to us than to being exposed to a wide variety of opinions.

Moreover, Facebook is less global than Zuckerberg makes us believe. Access to the internet is still distributed very unequally. This is especially true for differences according to space and the respective facilitation of access to the internet: in the larger Brazilian cities even homeless people have their Facebook profile, because public access to the internet is provided by the state, e.g. in public libraries and computers at the municipality, and not dependent on having an own computer, while in many poor countries internet access is still limited to a minority. So we are far from connecting all people, simply because of a lack of access, which makes for a structural problem.

But even if we overcome this problem of access, we face further difficulties in creating the global community of citizens: we are embedded into our local and national frameworks and most news shared on Facebook refer to these (Baumgarten, 2014). Language still is an important barrier to the global community. The simple translation of phrases by electronic devices is not enough to overcome the language barrier, because communication is situated in a cultural context that often needs to be explained too. Irene Theodoropoulou (2015) shows this very nicely with her examples translating Facebook posts by Aganaktismenoi (the Greek Indignants movement). By sharing articles or videos, we still do not have a translation service that also includes giving the contextual background to understand the message. Our friendship structure is based on real life meetings. It is school friends, people from your town, from work, hobbies, or family members that make most of your friendship circle. So a great majority of our Facebook friends and most of the issues we discuss are related to places where we have lived and are currently living, and the respective political debates and cultures we are acquainted with. This means that building a global community of citizens is not just a matter of improving technology.

The New Media – a Tool to Globalize Social Movements?

Social media improved the organisation of those already active in politics, for example in social movements and institutionalized politics. It is much easier now to stay informed about political activities. In the global perspective, this has for example led to more solidarity actions and a higher diffusion of action forms and claims. Global social movements and cooperation between activist groups at a global level is nothing new. It reaches back to times when global communication mainly involved writing letters (Broad, 2002). Cooperation could be intensified using new techniques, especially e-mail and internet. The rise of the global justice movement and the World Social Forums, which became famous for their success in bringing together people worldwide to discuss alternative ways of globalisation, took place at a time when e-mails had just become a mainstream means of communication. The social forums were successful in bringing together many people in face-to-face contact (Della Porta, 2009).

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The internet today is a very useful tool for social movements to spread information, ideas and action forms and to gain supporters (Gaby and Caren, 2012). It allows for cheap and fast travel of ideas and enables activists to send videos, mark the places of worldwide protest on interactive maps, consult online manuals on protest or invite speakers that contribute to events via Skype. There are new forms of activism, grouped together under the term “clicktivism”, like online petitions, or crowdfunding to finance campaigns. Countless offline activities are filmed and communicated online – in some cases web2.0 communication is the main aim of the off-line activity itself. So, globalized activism has definitely gained a new quality. On the other hand, studies also show that the diffusion of ideas and action forms still depends on personal, face-to-face contacts and that the internet cannot substitute (Baumgarten, 2016; Díez García, 2016; Romanos, 2015). To sum up, social media has especially improved the global cooperation of those who are already politically active. It provides a large variety of new forms of activism and tools for organizing. Social media’s potential to build a global community of politically active citizens, however, should not be overestimated.

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