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Background Paper

Social Media

4. Political Uses and Implications for Representative Democracy

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(Background Paper)

CONTENTS

SOCIAL MEDIA: 4. POLITICAL USES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY*

1   INTRODUCTION

Social media offer innovative opportunities for political actors, political institutions and the public to interact with one another.[1] Drawing on examples from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, this paper outlines how social media are currently being used in the political arena. It also discusses benefits and risks that have been attributed to the use of social media for political purposes, and explores the implications that the use of these technologies may have for representative democracy.

2   POLITICAL USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

2.1   POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Social media are becoming increasingly popular among politicians and their organizations as a means to disseminate political messages, learn about the interests and needs of constituents and the broader public, raise funds, and build networks of support. These activities often take place on privately run social networking sites that allow political figures and institutions to communicate with the public in unmediated, high-profile fora. In Canada, many parliamentarians have created accounts on popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Flickr. The content posted on these sites may relate to policy issues and the official work of politicians or to aspects of their personal lives.[2]

All four political parties represented in Canada's parliament have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Flickr. Each party also has its own YouTube channel on which news clips, advertisements, and other video recordings related to the party and its officials are shared with the public. Links to these accounts are included on the official websites of each party, along with features that allow users to "bookmark" and share elements of the party's websites with their online networks. Each party website also has unique social media features:

- *Bloc Québécois (BQ) – The BloCgue Québécois.*[3] Authored by party leader Gilles Duceppe, other members of parliament (MPs) belonging to the BQ, and party supporters, this blog discusses party activities and political issues. Users can comment on posts, follow links to other blogs that support the BQ, and discuss political news.

- *Conservative Party of Canada – MyCampaign.*[4] MyCampaign users can register to become "e-volunteers"; sign support letters (and invite friends to do the same); write a letter to the editor or call talk radio programs to convey key messages outlined by the party on the site; recruit new members; and raise funds for the party.

- *Liberal Party of Canada – Liberal Party Blog and Link to Liblogs.* The Liberal Party's website includes a blog with regular updates on party activities and platforms.[5] In addition, the official party website provides a link to Liblogs, a website that lists links to blogs written by Liberal Party supporters who have registered as Liblogs members.[6] Liblogs also aggregates selected content from these blogs into a frequently updated list of comments and news items. Liblogs is a non-profit corporation and is not officially affiliated with or governed by the Liberal Party of Canada.

- *New Democratic Party – NDP Blogging Tools and the Orange Room.* NDP Blogging Tools allow bloggers to customize the "look and feel" of their personal blogs to match that of the official party site. These tools allow users to add banner ads, NDP videos, blog templates and the "NDP Twitter" application to their blogs. The NDP website also includes a link to a website titled the Orange Room.[7] Although at the time of writing the website homepage states "Will Reopen Soon," during the 2008 Canadian federal election the Orange Room allowed users to share, rate and re-purpose digital media such as videos, photos, blog posts and tweets[8] related to the NDP.[9]

Social media are also used as campaign tools. For example, in 2009, the US presidency campaign Obama for America (OFA) drew on a database of approximately 13 million email addresses, an active community blog, and a digital network of volunteers to raise money, encourage voter turnout and support a grassroots approach to election campaigning.[10] According to one media strategist who worked on the campaign, social media served as the foundation of an overarching plan that attempted to connect online networking with offline campaign participation.[11] For example, those registered on the OFA website were encouraged to plan fundraising parties and canvassing activities with fellow supporters in their area. Similarly, the "get out the vote" campaigns run by both Barack Obama and Republican Party presidential candidate John McCain relied heavily on social media. Wikis[12] were used to capture contact information in a standard format that allowed users to share datasets of supporters and potential supporters and to coordinate outreach efforts. Other online tools allowed users to upload address books and send targeted messages to friends and family in support of their candidates.[13]

Social media have not yet figured as prominently in Canadian federal elections as they have in the United States. According to PublicInsite, a Web analytics firm, the 2008 Canadian federal election saw impressive advances in the use of Web-based campaign tactics, particularly with respect to Web design and the use of rich media,[14] but social media and other Web tools were used primarily to share information rather than to actively mobilize supporters.[15]

2.2 CIVIL SOCIETY

Social media are being used by citizens to connect with the public, influence decision-makers and hold legislatures and governments to account. In the United Kingdom, "They Work for You," a watchdog site affiliated with UK Citizens Online Democracy, helps users to follow the voting records, speeches and committee work of parliamentarians. The site combines its own content with that of the Hansard

Society and encourages users to make their own contributions to improve the amount and quality of information provided. In Canada, sites such as www.TweetCommons.com and www.politwitter.ca allow users to follow the Twitter accounts of Canadian political representatives in one central location. These sites also evaluate how active particular representatives are on Twitter, and rank political topics in terms of how frequently they are discussed by Twitter users. As is the case for "They Work for You," these sites rely in part on users' contributions to compile relevant information in a central, easy-to-use location.

In addition to facilitating public oversight of political actors and institutions, social media are used to raise awareness about and generate support for particular causes. For example, in 2007, a Facebook group led by University of Ottawa law professor Michael Geist voiced criticism of Bill C-61, An Act to amend the Copyright Act, tabled in the second session of the 39th Parliament. The Facebook group currently has almost 90,000 members.[16] Professor Geist believes that the online campaign contributed to the government's decision to conduct public consultations on copyright legislation in 2009.[17]

2.3 PARLIAMENTS AND GOVERNMENTS

Social media are used to educate the public about the work and values of parliaments, with the aim of reinforcing public trust and interest in parliamentary governance. The UK Parliament has been particularly active in its use of social media to foster public engagement.[18] At present, it has a YouTube Channel, a Flickr account, a Twitter account, a FriendFeed account and a Facebook page,[19] each of which offers frequent updates on MPs and on activities in parliamentary committees and the Houses of Parliament. In addition, the Parliament Labs blog chronicles developments in the UK Parliament website and in the use of social media by Parliament.[20] Finally, members of the House of Lords author a blog titled "Lords of the Blog." Managed by the Hansard Society, the blog aims to educate and engage with the public about the work of the House of Lords.[21]

Parliaments also employ social media to engage citizens in public policy debates. For example, the UK Parliament is experimenting with online consultations that allow the public to share their responses to specific questions on a topic under examination by a select committee. Participants can view and respond to the contributions of other participants if they wish, allowing for citizen-to-citizen as well as citizen-to-representative exchange.[22]

Similarly, governments have embraced social media as a tool to promote public education and engagement. In Canada, a number of federal agencies and departments have created Twitter accounts and Facebook pages to improve service delivery and disseminate information to the public. For example, Health Canada now uses Twitter to advertise product recalls.[23] Likewise, Citizenship and Immigration Canada uses Twitter to educate the public about Canadian immigration procedures.[24]

Governments are also using social media to solicit citizens' input in policy-making and to encourage public debate on policy issues. The US government site Regulations.gov gives individuals an opportunity to comment on regulations under

consideration by over 300 government agencies; users are also able to respond to other participants' comments.[25] Similarly, in Canada, the government's recent public consultation on copyright law reform illustrated how social media can support an exchange of viewpoints between citizens and decision-makers on public policy issues. In this case, users were invited to contribute to online forums and Web-streamed town hall meetings, and to discuss others' submissions on the consultation website.[26]

3 POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS OF THE POLITICAL USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions at this early stage about the impact of social media on political processes and representative democracy. Nevertheless, a number of potential benefits and risks have been attributed to the political applications of these communications technologies.

3.1 POTENTIAL BENEFITS

3.1.1 SOCIAL MEDIA MAY FOSTER GREATER PLURALISM IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Because social media give anyone with Internet access an opportunity to dissem-inate their ideas, some argue that they promote pluralism in political debate. By this view, social media ensure that mainstream media sources no longer monopolize information channels. In turn, new issues and ideas that might otherwise be ignored by the mainstream media can receive public attention.[27]

However, given their varying levels of expertise, individual users have unequal access to the full potential of social media as a publishing platform. For example, users with online marketing skills, access to Web analytics software, and technical knowledge can ensure that search engines direct Internet users to particular websites instead of others.[28] Similarly, established political parties and organizations have the resources to maintain a professional, well-executed online presence. Some argue that imbalances in online resources may simply replicate existing imbalances in more traditional communications resources, further entrenching the difficulty experienced by poorly funded political actors when they attempt to participate effectively in public discourse.[29]

It has also been noted that, despite the proliferation of new media as a source of information, political knowledge and voter turnout have not noticeably improved since their introduction. The findings of a US study suggest that greater media choice simply makes it easier for individuals to consume more of the types of content that they already prefer, whether political news or entertainment news; thus, the rise in new media–based political news sources has a perverse effect on the quality of representative democracy, since it exacerbates existing differences between those who are knowledgeable about politics, and are more likely to vote as a result, and those who are not.[30]

Finally, an evaluation of Internet use in the 2008 Canadian federal election reveals that the role of social media as a source of political information during the campaign was minor compared to that of traditional news sources such as television, newspapers and radio. This study noted that, of all sources of information, blogs ranked ninth in terms of the number of people who relied on them extensively for election coverage.[31] This continued preference for mainstream news sources may mean that social media users do not reach a broad range of the population when they publish political commentary using social media tools. However, the study authors also discussed the growing use of Web-based news sources relative to traditional sources, especially among young people. This trend may suggest that the significance of social media as a source of political information relative to traditional media will increase over time.[32]

3.1.2 SOCIAL MEDIA MAY ENABLE CITIZENS TO BECOME MORE EFFECTIVE POLITICAL ACTORS

Some people argue that social media remove barriers to collective action and empower citizens to influence and monitor the work of policy-makers[33] by offering a low-cost and, in some cases, more personal and compelling means of raising funds, spreading information and recruiting supporters from a broad range of back-grounds.[34] In addition, some note that, by enabling people to connect across long distances, new information and communication technologies, including social media, have been instrumental in the growth of transnational political movements.[35]

However, results of a recent Nanos poll suggests that social media–based political activism remains at the fringes in Canada. According to these findings, approximately 50% of Canadians believe that Facebook groups should have minimal to no impact on government, and approximately 30% have a negative to somewhat negative view of the use of Facebook groups to share ideas and mobilize activity.[36] At the same time, others argue that these numbers are promising, given that the culture of social media activism is still at an early stage in its development; they emphasize that, according to the same poll, approximately 30% of Canadians held a positive or somewhat positive view of Facebook-based campaigns.[37]

3.1.3 SOCIAL MEDIA MAY BUILD TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND FIGURES

Because social media allow citizens to interact with public institutions and figures in an informal and interactive manner, some argue that social media are personalizing politics and bolstering the public's faith in governing institutions and public figures.[38] This point of view is supported by a US study of online town hall meetings, which found that personal online interaction with members of Congress had a significant and positive influence on constituents' opinions of their representatives. Moreover, such interaction improved the likelihood that an individual would become more politically engaged and that he or she would vote for the candidate.[39] Similarly, others argue that these kinds of online exchanges may remedy the perception that public institutions are "overly rigid, unresponsive, and out of step with contemporary society."[40]

That being said, it is important to note that not all segments of the population participate equally in online networks, nor do all citizens participate in online political activities at the same rate or in the same way. The term "digital divide" is used to refer to the role that differences in access to and knowledge of Internet technologies play in determining one's likelihood of participating in online politics.[41] Further, a "digital divide" in online political participation also arises from factors that are thought to influence an individual's likelihood of becoming politically engaged, such as education, gender, income and geographical location. Because of these factors, some argue that online political participation simply replicates offline political participation: those who are traditionally absent from politics abstain from active participation, and those who are already engaged turn to the Internet as a new forum for participation. By this argument, social media may actually amplify existing gaps in participation as opportunities for online political participation expand and are seized by segments of the population that already tend to dominate political activity.[42]

Given this potential for a "digital divide," social media–based efforts to improve the public's perception of political institutions and figures may be lost on those who do not participate actively in politics, whether online or offline. The findings of a UK study support the idea that, at present, online politics reinforce existing inequalities, but suggest that, in the long run, experience using the Internet may broaden the range of people participating in online politics.[43] If this is the case, as the general population becomes more proficient in the use of the Internet, representatives and institutions that use social media to build public trust in their capabilities may reach a more representative sample of citizens.

3.1.4 SOCIAL MEDIA MAY HELP LEGISLATORS TO BETTER REPRESENT CITIZENS, AND GOVERNMENTS TO BETTER SERVE THE PUBLIC'S NEEDS

Because social media offer low-cost and user-friendly means of conducting an ongoing dialogue between citizens and their representative figures and institutions, some argue that social media will grant decision-makers a more sophisticated understanding of the public's interests and needs. Proponents of this view suggest that this improved understanding will lead to higher quality policies and programs.[44] However, as noted earlier, those who currently participate in social media–based political exchanges may not be representative of the general population. As such, the needs and interests they express may not serve as an accurate gauge of public opinion. In addition, as some argue, these new communications technologies will not necessarily alter who is represented or the means and frequency of representation in governing institutions and policy processes.[45]

3.1.5 SOCIAL MEDIA MAY ENGAGE YOUTH IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Young people in Canada demonstrate low levels of trust and interest in political institutions and representatives, and are less likely to vote and join political parties than previous cohorts of young Canadians.[46] Because young people are avid users of social media, these technologies are often discussed as one possible means by which young people may become more engaged in the democratic process. Proponents of this argument also note that young people expect immediacy and

interactivity when communicating, an assumption that might be better accom-modated by social media tools than by the complex, bureaucratic communication channels of many governing institutions.[47]

Moreover, in contrast to their low levels of participation as voters, young Canadians demonstrate a willingness and ability to participate in political activities on social media sites. In a 2009 study of Canadian youth, 52% of those surveyed had started or joined a Facebook group or cause, 47% went online to debate issues, and 39% had forwarded emails about causes.[48] Research from the United Kingdom also suggests that young people are more likely to use the Internet to acquire political information than members of older age groups.[49] Moreover, there is reason to believe that the education and income levels of young people engaged in online political activities do not differ significantly from those of young people who are not active in online politics. This suggests that social media strategies that attempt to engage youth in democracy may reach a relatively representative sample of youth from various socio-economic backgrounds and, as a result, might overcome the "digital divide" that complicates web-based efforts to increase levels of political engagement among the general population.[50]

However, other study findings have suggested that some young people feel intruded upon when public figures and institutions attempt to join their online social networks. In addition, although young people engaged in online politics are more likely to participate in offline political activities, such as voting, than their peers who do not participate online, it is not clear whether this relationship is one of causation or of correlation.[51] Without further research, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the role that social media can play in improving the level and quality of youth participation in democratic processes.

3.2 POTENTIAL RISKS

3.2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA MAY MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO CONTROL AN INDIVIDUAL'S OR INSTITUTION'S PUBLIC IMAGE

Social media offer users many opportunities to reach a large audience with criticisms of political figures and institutions. Because so many different social media outlets exist, it can be difficult to identify and address attacks on one's reputation that are published via these channels. For example, in the United Kingdom, "proxy bloggers" set up blogs that resemble official blogs of MPs. These bloggers do so to either compel particular MPs to start their own, legitimate, blogs or to critique the MP that they are impersonating. By this means, political figures can be misrepresented in potentially damaging ways.[52] Although this did not result from the malicious posting of content by adversaries, in the 2008 Canadian federal election a number of nominated candidates were forced to resign from the campaign when content from YouTube and Facebook surfaced and tarnished their reputations. In the same campaign, a YouTube video criticizing a political party attracted the attention of bloggers and mainstream news networks, demonstrating how social media can help political criticism to "go viral."[53]

A recent Supreme Court of Canada decision suggests that defamation law must account for comments published on social media platforms. In *Grant* v. *Torstar Corp*, the Court ruled that:

> [T]he traditional media are rapidly being complemented by new ways of communicating on matters of public interest, many of them online, which do not involve journalists. These new disseminators of news and information should, absent good reasons for exclusion, be subject to the same laws as established media outlets. I agree … that the new defence is available to anyone who publishes material of public interest in any medium.[54]

Even so, it can prove difficult to prosecute individuals for making defamatory statements online, since many people use social media without revealing their identities. Although no such legislation exists in Canada, recently an Australian court ruled that those who publish commentary on an election on social networking sites are required to reveal their postal codes and actual names.[55] Such legislation may make it easier for defamation law to be applied to social media users.

In any case, at this stage, it is not clear whether the benefits of new opportunities to communicate with the public and to "rise above the daily news cycle"[56] will outweigh, or counteract, the impact of negative attention arising from social media. Among the various tactics that can be used to mitigate the threat of negative publicity on social media networks are pre-programmable Web searches to ensure that an individual receives an email alert whenever his or her name, or that of an affiliated institution, is mentioned online.

3.2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA MAY PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR "SYNTHETIC LOBBYING"

Some fear that well-crafted and -executed social media campaigns led by special interest groups can dominate online exchanges with political figures and institutions to the point where decision-makers are misled about the actual extent to which ideas shared via these campaigns are representative of a widely held point of view.[57] Such advocacy tactics are often referred to as "synthetic lobbying."

That said, synthetic lobbying occurs even without social media. For example, coordinated letter-writing campaigns have long been an element of politics and the policy process, and policy-makers have developed mechanisms of identifying and addressing these organized campaigns to ensure that they do not gain an unreasonable influence over the policy process. Similarly, in the case of online synthetic lobbying, policy-making institutions can use electronic sorting mechanisms that identify online submissions from the public that form part of coordinated advocacy campaigns. By "weeding out" these particular submissions, whether emails to a representative, comments submitted to an online forum, or some other digital form of advocacy, these electronic mechanisms may mitigate the risk of special interest groups unfairly dominating online exchanges between policy makers and the public.[58]

3.2.3 POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND FIGURES MAY NOT HAVE THE NECESSARY RESOURCES TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTIVELY

Some argue that the use of social media demands excessive time and resources.[59] Others argue that, just as social media were adopted rapidly in the marketing world because of their low cost, so too can they be used by public figures and institutions without significant expenditures of time and money.[60] A number of practices may make it easier for political figures and institutions to meet the expectation that their social media accounts remain regularly updated. For example, the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) in the United States suggests re-using content already created for other purposes. In the case of a legislator, past letters written to constituents explaining a member's stance on a given issue could provide content for a blog post or status update. The CMF also argues that offering citizens multiple means of communicating with a legislator's office may ultimately save time and energy by allowing staff members to streamline requests, comments and questions.[61]

3.2.4 THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND FIGURES MAY LEAD TO A "SURVEILLANCE STATE"

By monitoring the information shared by citizens on social media sites, policy-makers and representatives can gain a better understanding of citizens' interests and needs. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Cabinet Office monitors popular social networking sites to learn about citizens' opinions on public services.[62] Social media monitoring is also being used to help states tackle organized crime and terrorist networks.[63] Whatever the potential benefits, some express concern that this type of monitoring will lead to a "surveillance state" in which the data shared by citizens via social media – including sexual orientation, religious belief, political affiliation and other sensitive information – is monitored and used in ways that breach privacy rights. In addition, some fear that the political institutions collecting this data may not be capable of storing it securely.[64]

4 CONCLUSION

At its core, the debate surrounding the political uses of social media centres on the question of what effect, if any, these new technologies have on our system of representative democracy. Proponents argue that these technologies promote accountability, transparency and public engagement with political institutions and figures. Sceptics argue that these technologies are too time-consuming and transform politics into a marketing game dominated by special interests and well-resourced political actors. It is too early to determine whether these potential benefits and risks are being, or will be, realized. What is clear, however, is that social media are quickly becoming standard communications tools for political figures and institutions and the citizens they serve. Only further experience and analysis will resolve the current uncertainty about their benefits and harms for representative democracy.

NOTES

*   This paper is one in a series on social media prepared by the Parliamentary Information and Research Service of the Library of Parliament. The other papers in the series are these: Michael Dewing, *Social Media: 1. An Introduction*, Publication no. 2010-03, 3 February 2010; Michael Dewing, *Social Media: 2. Who Uses Them?* Publication no. 2010-05, 3 February 2010; Alysia Davies, *Social Media: 3. Privacy and the Facebook Example*, Publication no. 2010-06, 8 February 2010; and Havi Echenberg, *Social Media: 5. Parliamentary Use in the United Kingdom*, Publication no. 2010-11, 25 March 2010.

1.   For a definition of social media, see Dewing (2010), *Social Media: 1. An Introduction*.

2.   Meg Wilcox, "Parties campaign like it's 1999," *Ottawa Citizen*, 30 January 2010.

3.   See the Bloc Québécois blog.

4.   See Conservative Party MyCampaign site.

5.   See the Liberal Party site.

6.   See the Liberal Party Liblogs.

7.   See the NDP blogging tools, the official New Democratic Party website and the Orange Room.

8.   Tweets are the short messages posted by users of the micro-blogging facility "Twitter."

9.   PublicInsite, "Still virtually lawn signs: Benchmarking Canadian political websites during the 2008 campaign," September 2008.

10.   Micah L. Sifry, "The Obama Disconnect: What Happens When Myth Meets Reality," *techPresident*, 31 December 2009.

11.   Wilcox (2010).

12.   A wiki is a website that allows users to easily add content to a series of linked web pages using simplified Web markup language.

13.   PublicInsite (2008).

14.   The term "rich media" or "interactive media," refers to video, text, audio, and other features that appear in response to a user's actions on a website.

15.   Ibid.

16.   "Fair Copyright for Canada," Facebook page.

17.   Michael Geist, "Critics misjudged the power of digital advocacy," *Toronto Star*, 18 January 2010.

18.   United Kingdom, House of Lords, Information Committee, *Are the Lords listening? Creating connections between people and Parliament*, First report, 8 July 2009; UK Parliament Labs, "UK Parliament: Our social media stats, one year on," Blog, 6 November 2009.

19.   See the following UK Parliament accounts: YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, FriendFeed, and Facebook.

20.   See the UK Parliament Labs blog.

21.   See the House of Lords blog.

22.   See the eConsultations page.

23.   See Health Canada's Twitter page.

24. See the WorkingInCanada Twitter page.

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32. Christopher Waddell, "The Campaign in the Media 2008," in Pammett and Dornan (2009), p. 220.

33. OECD (2007), p. 65.

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37. David Eaves, "Facebook's political reach," *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto], 19 February 2010.

38. Ferguson and Griffiths (2006), p. 367.

39. David Lazer et al., "Online Town Hall Meetings: Exploring Democracy in the 21st Century," Congressional Management Foundation, Washington, DC, 2009.

40. Jeffrey Roy, *E-Government in Canada: Transformation for the Digital Age*, University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 2006, p. 82.

41. See Dewing (2010), *Social Media: 2. Who Uses Them?*

42. Wainer Lusoli, Stephen Ward and Rachel Gibson, "(Re)Connecting Politics? Parliament, the Public and the Internet," *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2006, pp. 24–42.

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44. Ferguson and Griffiths (2006), p. 371.

45. Lusoli, Ward and Gibson (2006), pp. 24–42.

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49. Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006), p. 313.

50. Barnard (2009).

51. Ibid.

52. Ferguson and Griffiths (2006), p. 367.

53. Waddell (2009), p. 248.

54. *Grant* v. *Torstar Corp.*, 2009 SCC, 61, para. 96.

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