

Social Media and Politics

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet has generated enormous interest about whether and how digital platforms, including Social Media, have any impact on the political sphere. As a result, today we can rely on an increasing body of research addressing the multiple relations between Social Media and politics from different perspectives. The approaches proposed to explore the topic are often different and they do not always interact with each other, and force the analysis of its causes and effects into divergent paths arriving sometimes at different conclusions. However, there is an agreement on the fact that the Internet has created new channels of communication that have dramatically changed the flow of information compared with the known traditional media. Social Media play a key role in circulating news through multimedia platforms, beyond national borders, across social, cultural and

political niches. This chapter explores how this condition increases political knowledge. In this context, this chapter addresses whether and how Social Media influence politics. In particular, we address first, how the networked nature of the Internet facilitates forms of political engagement, and how this condition has further developed with the advent of Social Media. By focusing on the role that circulation of information have in increasing political knowledge and therefore enhancing political participation, we then address how Social Media further enhance this process increasing the influence of digital platforms on the political sphere. Finally, we provide evidence for the influence of Social Media on politics, by looking at how circulation of information plays a key role in the political sphere across political landscapes, actors and political practices, by paying particular attention to how Social Media is used for campaigning and for mobilizing social movements.

INTERNET AND POLITICS

The debate on how the Internet impacts the political sphere has been rich with contributions since its advent. In the 1990s, scholars approached research in this field interested in the interactive potentials of the Internet (Bimber, 1998; Gibson & Ward, 1998). The Internet was hailed as the opportunity for the realization of the ideal of direct democracy (Slaton, 1992; White, 1997). It was also argued that if the Internet failed in reaching this goal, then its impact on politics would be minimal. Coleman (2005) pointed out that this scenario did not take into consideration established institutional procedures of representative democracy, which have been mistakenly considered obsolete. However, given the initial limited penetration of digital technologies across political institutions, governmental processes, and reduced access to the Internet across geographies, and socio and cultural backgrounds, the initial debate addressing the impact of the Internet on politics was more theoretical driven than empirically grounded.

Since the advent of the public use of the Internet, the framework of research in this field has further evolved. Debate on how the Internet impacts politics has grown dramatically (Chadwick & Howard, 2009), and, as Castells and Sey (2004) observed, its influence is no longer proclaimed as fate but now established by observation. Today we can rely on more empirical evidence on the influence of the use of the Internet in politics (Hardy & Sheufele, 2005; Howard, 2003), thereby giving more substance to the debate. Studies explored the relationship between Internet and politics from a broad range of analytical perspectives. Scholars stressed that the Internet could develop civic engagement by creating connections between affinity groups (Diani, 2001; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002) enabling them to develop knowledge on specific political issues for citizens (Bimber, 2001), and to increase the ability to compare multiple points of view (Howard, 2005).

Others have been interested in the potential of the Internet in enabling self-expression, and in facilitating the spread of personal and local claims (della Porta & Mosca, 2005). The Internet has also been hailed as an opportunity to create new forms of political participation (Wright, 2004), as an instrument to better link citizens and political institutions, and finally, as a new space to discuss politics (Fearon, 1998; Price & Cappella, 2002). All these new conditions have been considered useful for strengthening democracies by enlarging political participation.

In short, the debate can be summarized along two opposite lines of argument: some scholars argue that the Internet is creating a new space of politics which is determinant for strengthening democracies, while other scholars point out that the Internet is a space to practice 'politics as usual' (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Many middle-ground conclusions have been provided between both opposite arguments. The famous conflict between 'cyber-optimists' and 'cyber-pessimists' has converged towards a more balanced optimism. The former have discovered that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are not a democratic panacea, while the latter cannot so easily deny the usefulness of digital technologies for facilitating political practices. Today we may conclude that the use of digital connectivity to practice politics has not revolutionized democracy as predicted by cyber-optimists, nor has there been any radical reorganization of political institutions or massive political inclusion of citizens caused by the Internet.

FROM THE INTERNET TO SOCIAL MEDIA

The Internet has evolved since its beginnings and its influence on politics has changed due to the rise of the many new digital platforms. From the first Bulletin Board System (BBS)¹, to our constant capacity to stay connected

through Social Media platforms via mobile phones, today the Internet offers a variety of tools that influence politics. This evolution then produces different effects, to which researchers quickly provide new analyses. The advent of Social Media has revolutionized further the capacity of digital platforms to connect people, allowing their constant interaction and cooperation, bringing their voices to a broader public. It is commonly assumed that Social Media play a key role in diffusing information and the claims of political groups (Chadwick, 2013). It is an important channel of communication through which political communities or individual citizens as simple members of the public can provide information about their activities, publicize their positions on specific topics, share information coming from multiple sources, as well as reporting about issues surrounding them at a specific time.

Addressing Social Media is therefore useful for understanding how political communities use the Internet to create their own channels of communication and contribute to the development of political knowledge. The new interactivity capacity of the Internet introduced through the proliferation of Social Media platforms are described in O'Reilly's (2005) definition of Web 2.0. This is clustered around seven main characteristics of the Web: 'the web as platform', 'harnessing collective intelligence', 'data is the "Intel inside"', 'the end of the software release cycle', 'light-weight programming models', 'software above the level of a single device', and 'rich user experiences'. Looking at these principles with a political science lens, Chadwick and Howard (2009) identify these as:

[1] the Internet as platform for political discourse; [2] the collective intelligence emergent from political web use; [3] the importance of data over particular software and hardware applications; [4] perpetual experimentalism in the public domain; [5] the creation of a small-scale form of political engagement through consumerism; [6] the propagation of political content over multiple applications; and [7] rich user experiences on political websites. (p. 4)

The (1) *Internet as a platform for political discourse* consists of the increasing interactive nature of the Web. People can receive information from it, but they may also contribute information to it. The Web has become scalable in that people can personalize the kind of information they wish to receive and they can spread their own information among people included in their social network. This use of the Internet has the consequence of sharing political claims and debate, and thereby the coordination of people. As described in details below, during the American presidential primary and electoral campaigns, examples emerged in this regards with the extensive use of the website Meetup (Hindman, 2009). In January 2007, John Edwards was the first ever presidential candidate to announce his candidacy via a video broadcast on YouTube. The American presidential campaigns in 2008 were the first campaigns where the presidential candidates Obama and McCain used Social Media. The use of Social Media has most conspicuously made its mark during more recent American presidential campaigns (Kreiss, 2016).

Web 2.0 offers space to digital platforms which best realizes the concept of (2) *collective intelligence* proposed by Lévy (1997). Thanks to the structure of Social Media, people can easily produce self-generated contents, and share these with others. Social Media platforms enable the coordination of different communities to produce collective goods. *Wiki* for instance, can be used to create self-generated content websites, allowing the cooperation of people to generate 'web contents'. The key example in this regard is the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, based on Wiki technology.

The ease of publishing information on the Internet brings us to the third theme stressed by O'Reilly (2005): (3) *the importance of data*. Diffusing information on politics and politicians has been possible since the advent of the Internet. However, diffusing information through Social Media makes control over this process even more difficult than it

is with traditional media (Benkler, 2006). Moreover, today the information spread by Social Media is more visual than ever before, providing multimedia contents. Its impact on people is more efficient.

Social Media facilitates (4) *public perpetual experimentalism* on the Web and practicing politics. The first Obama campaign confirmed this point, where many forms of fund-raising took shape, community groups were created, and video-speeches by politicians were placed on Social Media (Chadwick & Howard, 2009).

O'Reilly summarizes the fifth and sixth themes as the power of Social Media to (5) *create and* (6) *access self-generated contents* which empower people to become the sources of information. At the same time, Social Media facilitate the proliferation of information through flows becoming easier and more accessible to a variety of online sources.

This is also a result of the last characteristic pointed out by O'Reilly (2005) when he refers to Web 2.0: that of (7) *rich user experiences on political websites*. Social Media platforms are based on software applications enabling interaction with contents published on webpages. People can also contribute by modifying contents published by others. The result is a continuous process of improvement of information, in cooperation with other people.

As already stressed above, the enhanced interactivity capacity described with the label Web 2.0 is what is novel about Social Media platforms. There is an agreement on the fact that Social Media enhance the impact of the Internet on politics by empowering its networking characteristics, enabling the creation of large political digital communities, and generating further political debate and political contents (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008). However, the networking capacity of Social Media is not enough to explain their role in the political sphere. We need to address what is the additional value of being constantly connected, answer the question of

what the outcome of this new societal condition is, and how this condition influences the multiple dimensions of politics. We cannot deny that the Internet and social networks tools and multimedia self-generated content, in other words Social Media, are becoming a key source of information. As a result, in order to understand whether and how Social Media influence politics, we need to address how the networking facilities offered by Social Media create new opportunities to access information, increase political knowledge and whether and how this influences forms of political participations.

INFORMATION, POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Research on the relationship between information, political knowledge and civic engagement existed before the advent of Social Media. Since the first research was conducted by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) in the 1940s, sociologists have been interested in the relationship between television content, media exposure and popular culture. Empirical findings supported the idea that exposure to media has an influence on popular culture. Within the framework of political science, Lippmann (1947) and Dewey (1954) were interested in exploring how the advent of new communication media led to new forms of political engagement (Howard, 2006). Today, an increasing number of empirical findings in this field of research support the idea that television is an important source of knowledge about politics (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996), and that this especially influences people with lower levels of information (Freedman, Franz, & Goldstein, 2004). People mainly acquire information on the profile of candidates (Weaver, 1996) and their positions on specific issues (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Weaver & Drew, 1993) from television news.

As a result of the extensive research in this field, today there is agreement on how exposure to political information is more likely to increase civic engagement by increasing citizens' knowledge about political issues (Alvarez, 1997; Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Tan, 1980). But, how does the Internet fit in? How does the exposure to online information influence politics? And what is the specific role of Social Media?

If it is commonly understood that the circulation of information increases political knowledge and thus can energize political engagement, the debate on how this happens through the Internet is still fragmented around contrasting arguments. Contrary to what is expected, early research argued that the use of the Internet to spread political communication would not prevent the trend of a decline in political engagement (Davis & Owen, 1998; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Putnam, 2000). It was claimed that inequality in political participation online was the projection of the same inequality of off-line civic engagement (Mossberger et al., 2008). More pessimistic arguments point out that the Internet may in reality decrease social connections. Putnam (2000) argued that people who primarily use the Internet as a source of information are less likely to invest time with other people and to volunteer for group action. He thus did not believe that the use of the Internet increases political engagement. Putnam (2000) supported his argument with research based on an extensive survey of North American society. Some scholars explain that the lack of political engagement via the Internet is caused by the fact that computer mediated communication weakens social signs, such as body language and physical contact, thereby de-personalizing interaction between people (Nie & Erbring, 2000). Putnam (2000) adds that the absence of social signs in computer-mediated communications weakens trust between people.

On the other hand, the networked infrastructure of the Internet has been welcomed by scholars as the medium which offers an

opportunity to change traditional models of communication by making it easier for people to be active speakers and shape new multi-directional information flows (Benkler, 2006). In the framework of politics, people become spreaders of information and producers of political contents in a way that is much easier than in the past (Benkler, 2006). The proliferation of participatory media creates a self-organizing mesh of public communications, in contrast with the traditional 'hub-and-spoke architecture of mass media' (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). In other words, the recent evolution of communication technologies has generated a more democratic model of public communication (Benkler, 2006), and this is even more evident with the advent of Social Media. They are more inclusive and interactive than older models clustered around traditional mass communication media (Benkler, 2006). The hierarchical organization and the oligarchic form of traditional media make it more easily controllable by capital or government organizations. This risk is even higher in countries with authoritarian regimes, where this authority is destabilized by Internet technologies. According to Benkler (2006), even in those cases where regimes run censorship policies involving filtering the content of the Internet, the Internet still offers the opportunity to undermine control. Because of this, it is difficult to deny that digital platforms allow information, and testimony about what happens on the ground, even in remote areas, to become public (Sunstein, 2007, p. 142).

However, today, the pervasiveness of digital news often spread via Social Media is not unanimously lauded with optimism. In contrast with the optimistic arguments proposed so far, Hindman (2009) points out that critics raised for the very same reasons so far welcomed as positive claims. Some argue that the digital news production is too democratic. This is why it gives space to unqualified voices, replacing the precision and objectivity 'ensured' by professional journalists, with possible inaccurate sources of information (Hindman, 2009). According to Currah

(2009), in the domain of journalism a clear contrast is commonly made between the speed in news-making and the quality of information. Given that the Internet has sped up the circulation of information, some scholars argue that the quality of news is threatened by this new condition. The Internet produces an enormous amount of information, and Social Media helps to rapidly circulate and turn information into a cacophony. Professional journalists are forced to adapt to this scenario by collecting information at the same speed. The Internet has become the main source of information here.

However, in the cacophony of digital information, the risk of receiving fake information that can be hard to verify is high. Furthermore, any mistake in the information narrative is quickly amplified by the interconnected structure of the Internet. In this quick process professional journalists cannot spend sufficient time to make the information accurate (Currah, 2009). For this reason, information coming from the Internet is usually quoted with euphemistic words, such as, for instance, 'Internet's rumors' (Sunstein, 2009) or 'Internet buzz'. Davis (2009) gives as an example an event that took place during the 2008 American presidential campaign. A photo, showing the presidential candidate Barack Obama wearing a traditional Kenyan dress, circulated over the Internet. Some people considered the photo the proof that Obama was Muslim. Journalists reporting the news did not mention the Blog which first published the picture. Journalists usually do not quote Bloggers because they look at information coming from Social Media platforms with skepticism. This has much to do with the fact that online sources have become a competitor of sorts in the news-making process, but also a source of groundless news (Davis, 2009).

Nonetheless, journalists increasingly depend on the Internet for news material. Using Social Media as the main source of information has also changed the profile of journalists. Without Social Media, journalists

had to be physically located close to the event in order to collect information. Journalists needed to reach in person the source of information, by travelling and meeting people. The job of journalists involved actual investigation in the field. Today, journalists can also stay at their office desk collecting information from the multiple available Social Media platforms, remaining far from the object of their narrative. Some scholars argue that by skipping these stages in the news-making production, journalists diminish the quality of their news (Currah, 2009).

Following a cyber-pessimist line, Sunstein (2001) argues that the Internet offers a landscape of fragmented information. This allows people to reach directly the source of information they are interested in. However this also allows people to bypass other sources of information or to approach topics from other points of view which could enrich their knowledge and opinion on the topic. Sunstein (2001) describes this as the 'cyberbalkanization' of information. In contrast, since mainstream traditional media aim to satisfy the needs of a public as broad as possible, they spread a wider range of accessible information. By using off-line traditional media, people are then forced to receive inputs even if they are not looking for them (Sunstein, 2001). With the concept of 'cyberbalkanization' Sunstein (2001) argues that the Internet actually narrows the possibilities for information. This argument could explain why blog readers are more polarized than television consumers, as has been empirically shown by Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell (2010). However, Sunstein's argument is not new in the field of communication research.

Similar warnings were also made in the past, referring to traditional media. Already in 1985, Meyrowitz rejected the idea that the evolution of media would lead to a balkanization of knowledge. The author did not refer to the advent of the Internet. Rather, he explored the risk of a balkanization of information by focusing on the increasing use of satellite television. For some scholars, the narrow

focus of television channels also narrowed people's interests and general knowledge. This is why people were less likely to receive information from channels that usually did not spread information of primary interest to them. Meyrowitz (1985) did not agree with this argument, believing that the spread of the use of technology – the television in this case – would have in any case offered people the opportunity to also explore by chance information that it would not have been possible to reach with former generalist media more than in the past. I consider this conclusion also relevant with regard to the use of the Internet. The Internet allows easy access and quick interaction with sources of information (Mossberger et al., 2008). It is more able to reduce any gender, race and age gap in the process of communication (Rheingold, 2000). It also allows interaction between people which would not have been possible without the Internet (Benkler, 2006). Thanks to all this, the Internet exposes people to different political points of views (Garrett, Horrigan, & Resnick, 2004). Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2008) argue that the 'cyber-balkanization' risk is overestimated. Sunstein has (revised his arguments in an updated version of his work, conceding that 'certainly empirical evidence could demonstrate that the risk of group polarization is small – if, for example, people actually read a wide range of views, and not simply those with whom they antecedently agree' (2007, p. 146).

Summarizing the research in this field, even taking in account the cyberpessimist arguments, it is difficult to deny that Social Media amplify the political voice of ordinary citizens more than traditional media. This new condition has been welcomed as a change whereby citizens are no longer mere passive consumers, but rather, become actively involved in opening political debate via the Internet. In other words, Social Media have made it easier to publish and circulate information, enormously influencing the way news is available and consumed online. Social Media have made information more

multimedia than any other media platforms, making it more usable. At the same time, converging with mobile phones, Social Media have made news constantly accessible, facilitating the diffusing of news easily and more quickly among people than was possible with traditional media and older digital platforms. As a result, by shifting our focus to the use of Social Media for the diffusion of knowledge on political issues, the increasing amount of research addressing the impact of digital media on politics shows similar conclusions to those so far introduced on traditional media. Empirical findings highlight that reading newspapers, or other format like mediums, requires high information-acquiring skills (Healy & McNamara, 1996; Kyllonen & Christal, 1990). This implies that people learn about politics more easily from watching television than from reading newspapers (Smith, 1989). Empirical research led by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press² confirms that people consuming online news are more likely to have better knowledge on political issues than someone who only uses traditional media (Pew Research Center, 2008).

News consumption also stimulates political debate among people (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973), and Social Media offer several instruments to create open spaces for political debate, creating cheap, fast and flexible ways of interpersonal communication. According to Thomas and Streib (2003) the use of the Internet increases *political knowledge* more than format-like newspapers. Online news, in their opinion, is more accessible and thus more likely to be acquired by people. Political knowledge is more likely to generate *political discussion* thanks to the possibilities of interactivity offered by Social Media. Moreover, the Internet, compared to traditional media, facilitates reception of information from a broader range of point of views. This condition generates a greater *political interest* (Mossberger et al., 2008). Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2008) highlight with empirical findings these three lines of causality between the use of

the Internet and the increase of civic engagement. They confirm that the use of the Internet to consume and share political information allows citizens to increase their knowledge on political issues. This implies that citizens increase their interest in politics and are more likely to engage in generating political debate.

Debate in this field is still open, however. We need more time to find longer term empirical evidence to lead us to conclusions in this regard. Even in the connection with the production of news, the debate between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists provides us interesting arguments that need to be further investigated. Here, however, we are discussing whether and how Social Media increase interest in political issues among citizens and facilitates political debates, helping them to increase their political knowledge. All these conditions then can encourage citizens to further engage in politics. If there are still questions about the direct impact of Social Media on politics, there is agreement on the fact that Social Media allow citizens to be not only receivers of information, helping them to form a voting preference or to inspire them to join some campaign or participate in demonstrations, but also to use the Internet to spread information, create new spaces to debate on politics, form affinity groups, and run grassroots campaigns.

ADDRESSING SOCIAL MEDIA ACROSS POLITICS AND POLITICAL ACTORS

The concept of politics includes a broader sense of political participation that goes beyond the formal political processes and the interaction between public institutions and citizens (Almond & Verba, 1980). The richness of a political system is then supported by different forms of political practice. These may be taken on by different political actors depending on their aims, conditions and use of different tools. As a result, Social Media fit differently into politics depending on the

framework in which they are used. This implies that due to the existence of different form of political practices, we can provide many answers to our questions about the relationship between the Social Media and politics.

Here, in order to put order among contrasting positions, when exploring how Social Media influence politics by facilitating information sharing processes, we should clarify which kind of political practice we are discussing. We should clarify if, for instance, we are referring to how candidates and political parties use Social Media for their political daily activities, or how they use it for their political campaigns. Are we concerned with how public institutions use Social Media to involve citizens in their activities? Can we say that Social Media create new spaces for debating, and facilitate an increase in public consciousness on political issues? Can we say that Social Media play a role in facilitating the mobilization and coordination of social movements, and eventually challenge autocratic regimes, such as argued in occasion of the Arab Spring?

By addressing these questions, we are able to better systematize the multiple impacts that Social Media have on politics. We may then refer, for instance, to how Social Media facilitate campaigns when we look at how political parties and candidates use Social Media to design communication strategies aiming to optimize visibility and obtain voters' support from citizens. Social Media are also used for supporting protests performed by social movements, where Social Media are used to decentralize the diffusing of alternative information, to create adversarial positions, and to coordinate protests (Calderaro & Kavada, 2013). Social Media facilitate all these political practices, inherent to a healthy democracy.

In what follows we look at empirical evidence that helps to understand how Social Media support political practice. My focus is first on how political parties use Social Media to get people involved in 'conventional' forms

of political participation, such as voting and participation in established processes of governance. Second, I will examine how social movements shape the use of the Internet to practice what Marsh defines as 'unconventional' forms of political practice: those practices and tactics run by a 'non-institutional side of politics, outside the realm of conventional or orthodox political participation (i.e. voting, being a member of a political party, lobbying), and on the other hand, do not equal severe political crime, such as terrorism' (1977, 42).

Social Media for Campaigning

Scholars have welcomed with optimism the support offered by the Internet first and Social Media more recently for political parties and their candidates (Gibson, 2015). This is because the Internet provides more opportunities than traditional media to circulate information among voters, creating new channels for self-publicity (Ward & Vedel, 2006). Digital communication strategies support direct communication between political party leaderships and the general public (Zittel, 2009), which can encourage them to vote (Mossberger et al., 2008). Digital platforms are commonly used not only during elections, but also for the 'permanent campaign' during periods of post-election governance (Farrel & Webb, 2000; Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003; Norris, 2000). In periods of post-election governance, the Internet may in fact facilitate organization capability and offer multi channels of expression for diffusing opinions across political parties and voters (Norris, 2001). In order to summarize the impact of the Internet on politics, Norris (2001) suggested the 'Virtual Political System' model. Here the focus is on how intermediary organizations link state and citizens. In this framework, the impact of the Internet on politics depends on how institutions benefit from opportunities offered by the Internet to improve and strengthen these connections. Other studies explore the relationship between Social Media

and politics from a broad range of analytical perspectives.

However, there is no agreement on the relationship between the diffusion of information through digital platforms and its influence of increased voting turnout. Some scholars argue that people receiving information from the Internet are more likely to vote (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003), while others claim that there is no relationship between online news and participating in politics through voting (Bimber, 2001). Since it is commonly thought that political parties are hierarchical organizations and that they produce communication flows from their headquarters to people outside (Zittel, 2009), there is however agreement that there is a top-down character to the use of the Internet, whereby political parties seek to involve people to practice politics (Blumler & Coleman, 2009).

The Obama campaign, during his first presidential election in 2008, provides some interesting empirical evidence on the role Social Media can play to enhance communication strategies of candidates. A robust body of research has explored the role that Social Media played in engaging citizens in the campaign, creating political communities supporting the candidate, and raising money. Since then, research on the topic has evolved, and scholars have studied campaigns worldwide, which continue contributing empirical evidence on the impact of Social Media on campaign strategies. As a result, today we can conclude that the new flow of information that came with the advent of Social Media have had a dramatic effect on the design of campaigns. Until the early 1990s, political campaigns were mostly using traditional media as the main channel of communication. TV was the media more accessible to everyone regardless of social, cultural, and political background. In this context, communication strategies mostly relied on its 'catch all' nature (Gibson, 2015). In other words, campaigns needed to design a unique message that would speak to all people.

With the development of technology, this scenario has changed dramatically. New technologies have fragmented the media

offerings, with the consequence of diversification of the audience and information consumption. This new media landscape allows people to tailor information consumption according to personal needs, but also depending on geographical context, socio, political and cultural background. This newly fragmented media landscape has forced political communicator advisers and candidates to diversify their communication strategies accordingly. Social Media have pushed this tendency further, finally changing the older centralized campaign strategies typical with traditional media into a new more customized campaign able to fit the multiple new digital channels of communication (Gibson, 2015).

At the same time, Social Media also allows candidates to constantly spread information about their activities, establishing a direct contact with voters, conditions that facilitate candidates to engage supporters in their campaigns. The presidential campaign run by Howard Dean in 2008 represents the first notable example in this regard. Dean, who was running for the democratic nomination in the presidential election in 2008, is recognized to be the first candidate to have based his entire campaign on social media strategies. His website was designed to make the most out of the multiple available Social Media tools, including Meetup which was a key source for Dean to coordinate, organize, and engage his supporters. The use of Social Media for Dean's campaign has been considered to be successful also because of the high amount of funding collected via the web. As already stressed above, the subsequent Obama campaign further developed Dean's Social Media strategy, consolidating the role of digital platforms in campaigns.

With the narrowing of the Digital Divide, and the global diffusion of digital platforms, we can observe equivalent examples across political systems and electoral turnout worldwide (Calderaro, 2014). In Italy, for example, the Five Star Movement has become the first political party to campaign using only Social Media to coordinate its supporters, and to

inform and engage voters. The Five Star Movement did not appear a single time on TV. Its success, has given further proof of the influence of Social Media on the political sphere (Natale & Ballatore, 2014). We are witnessing a growing number of success stories about the use of Social Media to enhance candidates' political communications strategies and their campaigns, and we can expect that this will continue as the Digital Divide narrows across political systems.

Social Media for Mobilizing the Streets

If we narrow the concept of democratic politics to only a few elements and forms, we ignore the importance of many other political dynamics whose *raison d'être* is to ensure democracy. We know for instance that the concept of democracy is not only about the effective organization of executive and legislative power (Cammaerts, 2008). Mass public participation in the formal political process is another important characteristic of democracy (Norris, 2001). There are yet many other elements that support democracy. In the framework of research on social movements, scholars pay attention to the role that Social Media play in facilitating grassroots forms of political participation. In this case, the Internet is considered a useful instrument for connecting transnational social movements and protest events (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Calderaro, 2010), and to challenges autocratic regimes (Howard & Hussain, 2013). According to Tarrow (2005), the Internet facilitates coordination between political groups, shifts political aims from a local to a transnational dimension, and links struggles worldwide. Scholars have paid attention to how the Internet supports social movements in creating independent and powerful channels of communication (della Porta & Mosca, 2005). The Internet then may also facilitate the coordination in political communities (Calderaro, 2010; Diani, 2001). Blumler and Coleman (2009) include the

bottom-up flow of communication generated by social movements in their category of 'E-Democracy from below'. With this, the authors refer to various forms of grassroots collective action for which the Internet offers autonomous communication channels 'to interact beyond, around and across institutionally-controlled communication channels' (Blumler & Coleman, 2009, p. 117). In this framework, the Internet is used to energize so-defined 'unconventional' political practices (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Marsh, 1977).

Social Media also impact politics where Internet is not massively accessed, and mobile phone and mobile coverage is still weak. A good example on this matter has been the role that Social Media played in supporting and coordinating protests during the Arab Spring. Given the not massively spread use of digital technologies, we could expect that the Social Media in North Africa would have had no influence on politics. We would expect that given the limited access to the Internet, and therefore to Social Media, people did not have the opportunity to use digital platforms to engage in debates about politics, diffuse information, share political knowledge, and join in the protest. However, in a context of limited freedom of expression and limited access to neutral and accountable media channels, Social Media became the main source of information, and acquired a key role also when not accessed by the entire population. This is because, as discussed above, information spread via Social Media is usually quickly absorbed by traditional media, which distribute the news across their traditional media channels reaching people who are offline.

Even before the Arab Spring, in their pioneering research on the use of Social Media in Iran, Kelly and Etling (2008) had mapped the characteristics of the Iranian Blogosphere in late 2000s, concluding that the Persian Blogosphere represented a vast space for debate animated by 60,000 constantly updated Blogs. Despite the fact that Iran's autocratic government has exercised

repression on the country's media landscape and limited freedom of expression, leading to the arrest of numerous local Bloggers, Kelly and Etling (2008) found that the Iranian Blogosphere supported a rich and diverse political discourse. Citizens animated debate on topics common to the international agenda, such as human rights, and also more broadly by focusing on topics relevant for Iranians (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). In a similar scenario to Tunisia and Egypt before the Arab Spring, and in other countries today, the Iranian government exercises serious control over the Internet, including intimidation, the arrest of critics of the regime, and the filtering of online information. These are obstacles that limit the capacity of Social Media to create a totally democratic space for debate (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008).

However, networked forms of communications, such as those which happen through Social Media, may enable people to bypass the control system, overcoming authoritarian regime censorship (Benkler, 2006; Calderaro, 2015). In Iran, this allowed for the emergence of grassroots news websites, enabling Iranian citizens to maintain their own independent channels of communication for diffusing information and opinion. This would not be possible with traditional mainstream media under the strict control of government (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). This is not sufficient to argue that Social Media allowed the control performed by any authoritarian regime to be overcome. However, Social Media did allow a more open political discussion that would otherwise not have been possible under the conditions of a restrictive media environment (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008). In the case of Iran, given such considerations, authors conclude that,

Given the repressive media environment in Iran today, Blogs represent the most open public communications platform for political discourse. The peer-to-peer architecture of the Blogosphere is more resistant to capture or control by the state than the older, hub and spoke architecture of the mass media model [...] then the most salient political and social

issues for Iranians will find expression and some manner of synthesis in the Iranian Blogosphere. (Goldstein & Rotich, 2008, p. 48)

Shortly after Kelly and Etling published their research on the Iranian case, the Arab Spring provided further confirmation of their conclusions. The recent mobilizations which happened in Tunisia and Egypt, has provided evidence of how Social Media can be a fundamental instrument in the hands of citizens. In occasion of the Arab Spring, we have gained empirical evidence about the role that Social Media had in helping citizens to contribute to news-making.

In the period of violent street demonstrations and riots involving a large part of the population in Egypt and Tunisia, both governments strictly controlled their national media landscape (Howard & Hussain, 2013). This made it difficult to receive unbiased information on what was happening on the street through mainstream national media. People were successful in challenging mainstream media by using Social Media. Information was brought to the entire world in real time thanks mainly to online video and microblogging tools, such as Twitter and Facebook. People largely used mobile phones to capture pictures and record video. Social Media were the channels through which people uploaded real-time video on web video-streaming services, such as YouTube, and published photos and update their Twitter and Facebook accounts with text messages from their mobile phones. Given the serious censorship applied by the Tunisian and Egyptian governments, this was the only form under which information circulated quickly worldwide. The Tunisian and Egyptian governments attempted to block the use of Internet to spread information by switching off the Internet infrastructure. However, at the same time, activists were successful in keeping some Internet channels open, overcoming the regime's block of the network. The government was only able to completely stop the flow of digital information for a limited

time, which did not entirely disrupt the use of Social Media and the efficacy of information and multimedia materials coming directly from the street.

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised is the title of a key book in this field of research (Trippi, 2004). Professional journalists worldwide watched the Arab Spring mobilization directly through the experiences of citizens on the street in Tunisia and Egypt, and events were reported from their point of view. Worldwide mainstream media, including satellite television, national newspapers and other news broadcasting channels used the multimedia information uploaded on Social Media by protesters as their main sources in reporting to the rest of the world what was happening on the street. Citizens, consciously or not, became journalists by simply reporting through Social Media what they were witnessing of the event in which they were taking part.

CONCLUSION

The Internet is often considered a technology with the potential of influencing human action, regardless of the context. However, expectations that the Internet would fundamentally alter political processes have largely failed due to its techno-determinist perspective. According to Hindman (2009), research on how the Internet impacts on politics has falsely assumed that digital platforms would revolutionize the established framework of politics over time. This assumption is not new (Hindman, 2009): the telegraph and rotary printing press, and more recently radio and television (Barnouw, 1966; Bimber, 2003; McChesney, 1990), were welcomed with similar enthusiasm. New technologies however are not as determinative as such techno-determinist approaches would have it. Rather, their influence on society develops according to the characteristics of the cultural, political, economic, and historical conditions in which they thrive (Barber, 2003).

Among the still existing tensions between cyber-pessimists and cyber-optimists, we have in this chapter questioned whether a relationship between the Internet, and in particular Social Media, and politics exists at all. In order to answer this question, we have first framed the rich body of research addressing the role that the Internet has in facilitating forms of political aggregations, enhancing political engagement. We have then shown how the advent of Social Media has further boosted the capacity of networked facilities to influence politics. We have discussed how 'information' spread via Social Media is a key element in the development of political knowledge, generating political engagement and enhancing forms of political participations. Finally, rather than treating Social Media as a unique dimension of politics, we explored how Social Media has the capacity to influence politics depending on the framework and conditions that shape its use. In the framework of politics discussed here, we then explored how different political actors use Social Media for campaigns and for coordinating mobilizations.

With this chapter we stressed that despite the multiple contrasting arguments addressing the influence of the Internet on the political sphere, Social Media have made the Internet a more efficient networking tool for interaction between people. Social Media facilitates communication within an organization, along local, national, and transnational lines, and as such it may create or strengthen relations between individuals, organizations, and external actors. The aim of the use of Social Media platforms is to circulate information coming from multiple sources. It is the digital space in which individuals can directly and actively submit and access information, develop their political knowledge, and get involved in political debates, overcoming time lags, geographical distances and often hierarchical dynamics existing in some communities.

We can conclude that our enthusiasm about the advent of the Internet and Social Media is justified inasmuch as these have

democratized the process of news-making, and have made information more accessible. In this context, when we address the relation between Social Media and politics, we are interested in understanding how information impacts politics, and how the networking nature of digital platforms has strengthened its influence on various political practices, and included citizens in these processes as never before.

Notes

- 1 BBS is a system of information storage reachable via dial-up connections.
- 2 www.people-press.org.

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