

Book Review

Loader, B. and Mercea, D. (eds) (2012)

Social Media and Democracy. Innovations in Participatory Politics. London: Routledge, pp. 1–275.

Brian Loader and Dan Mercea rally a group of political/social/media scientists to shed light on social media and democracy. Is social media supporting transformations of democratic power or merely inspiring the latest round of cyber-utopian hype? Current developments in democracy are investigated, in recent Internet contexts, more or less in the context of social media.

For this reviewer, coming from the field of social informatics rather than political science or media studies, the book provides useful and interesting introductions to certain contemporary ideas about democracy and participation. These ideas form two themes in this review.

The first theme concerns Bennett's concepts of self-actualizing or dutiful citizens [1] (outlined later) in the context of Web 2.0. For the purposes of this review, the term 'Web 2.0' will be used, as popularised by O'Reilly [2], to describe online platforms in which user inputs and interaction create the sites' outputs, both in terms of content and value. However, it's worth noting that the Web 2.0 concept is contested as a contemporary vision of Internet use and applications [3]. Many chapters explore the potential alignment of citizens' dispositions to democracy, after Bennett [1] and Coleman [4], with their preferences for either more or less citizen-generated website content, Web 2.0-style.

The second theme concerns the role and status of contemporary news media, on and offline. This theme also encompasses dispositions to democracy and assesses the opportunities for citizens to act and interact online, the quality of opportunities available to various citizens and the potential effects of their take-up.

The collection of papers seems to engage well with these two themes in terms of political engagement, but partially, at best, in terms of social media. Probably due to this reviewer's social informatics background, the technology landscape seemed to missing, replaced by the backdrop of social media as Web 2.0. For example, the book showcases an interesting selection of methods to study Internet use, both new and adapted, but neglects social, practical and technical perspectives on media choice. Social media are presented as a contemporary facet of media and democracy, with little regard to the structure behind; social and technical drivers, risks and constraints. Web 2.0's user-generated content seems to be paired rather unquestioningly with (e-)democracy and few authors tackle the unsavoury issues of commercial control of social media, or increased surveillance. To be fair, these issues were perhaps less salient when the chapters were written.

This review focuses on a few chapters, selected to represent the main themes of the book. An overview of all thirteen chapters would, unfortunately, leave no room for analysis. The book presents chapters in three sections:

1. Social Movements: Pushing the Boundaries of Digital Political Participation
2. Participation Dynamics: Intersections Between Social and Traditional Media
3. Digital Political Participation in Stasis or Flux?

Broadly, sections one and two reflect the two themes identified above. A majority of the chapters in the third section aim to investigate young people's experiences of citizenship, though the two themes predominate in places. These three sections are a reasonable way to organise the book, though Loader

and Mercea's introduction is probably a better guide to identifying the chapters of most interest to the reader and should not be skipped, as it usefully summarises the optimism-pessimism curve of digital democracy. Does the current excitement around social networking tools indicate a new wave of Internet mythology or new opportunities for changing power dynamics? Loader and Mercea hope that the book chapters will provide evidence either way.

In the 'Social Movements' section, Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's study is presented first. They conceive of social media in terms of Web 2.0 interactions: i.e. content generated by website visitors. They wonder if promoting this type of content (interaction) threatens a social movement, risking loss of engagement, focus and solidarity, through loss of central control. 'Inventories of interactive digital affordances' are conducted for the websites of two, quite different, umbrella groups organising G20 protests. Each inventory records engagement features, such as links to sign petitions, post content or share on social media. Meanwhile, a web crawler records links to and from the websites, in order to measure network strength. Combining the results from these two methods, the organisation which provides most opportunities for users to control its website content (relinquishing control of the content, in the terms of the chapter) is also the stronger organisation, according to network strength measured by the web crawler. However, cause and effect are not adequately explored. There are major differences between the organisations, in terms of their history and resources, which are not presented here. These differences are likely to influence both their choice of media, and their position in networks, prior to and throughout the study. Diverse considerations, beyond ideology, influence social media preferences and implementations. These could usefully be explored and fed into this analysis.

In the 'Digital Political Participation' section, Ariadne Vromen provides a handy overview of Bennett's dutiful/actualizing citizen concept and Coleman's parallel conventional/autonomous norms of citizenship and aligns these to website content in terms of information provision/user-generated content. Briefly, *dutiful citizens* conceive of democracy narrowly, mostly in terms of institutions, and participation in terms of a small number of traditional activities such as voting or contacting representatives. *Self-actualizing citizens* focus on their own participation, for example through life-style politics and digital networks, rather than the actions of traditional media and politicians.

Vromen's interesting study suggests that young people in website design teams try to produce websites that provide approved information for those in authority (dutiful teachers, funders) and provide Web 2.0 opportunities for their (potentially self-actualising) peers. This is one of a number of studies in the book, seemingly inspired by the potential alignment of Web 2.0 functionality, including social media, with expanded, citizen-centred concepts of democracy. It is probably the most convincing example in the book, though it comes towards the end.

Donatella della Porta, in the 'Social Movements' section, provides theoretical contexts for the relationship between conceptions of democracy and choice of online tools. Della Porta suggests that this area requires research input from traditionally separate domains, but risks alienating academics, from potentially appropriate domains, by claiming that media studies and social movement studies have paid "*limited and selective attention to democracy*" (p45). Further, "*the discussion on the improvement of democratic politics on the web tends to remain either highly normative or quite technical, with even some nuances of technological determinism*" (p44). These somewhat provocative statements aside, it is an engaging contribution. Further, della Porta kindly intersperses summaries of her argument throughout her chapter.

Janelle Ward's contribution, in the 'Digital Political Participation' section, also focuses on aligning Bennett's self-actualizing/dutiful citizen concepts with the prevalence of user-generated content on youth organisation websites. The study sought interviews with people prepared to answer questions about website strategy and maintenance. However, the respondents were communications staff or editors, rather

than website producers or developers. It is therefore likely that important perspectives on technology choices were missed. It is not clear if Ward could have gained interviews with more technical staff by further or more specific requests for interviewees. Perhaps the interviewees' profile influenced the way that choices about using social media are presented, in the chapter, as aligned with models of citizenship. Different participants may have led to other potential influences being explored, such as available resources, IT strategies and ethical questions about commercial social media providers and young people.

Finally on this theme, in the 'Digital Political Participation' section, Giovanna Ascheroni and her team analyse online participation practices through focus groups of young people. Following Bennett, they find that young people tend to embrace wider models of participation. Interestingly, they find that the most disengaged young people have the narrowest conceptions of participation and lowest sense of self-efficacy. In this study, these are mainly the youngest and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These young people express disconnection from society and boredom with political issues and news.

The book's second theme is news media. In this theme, throughout the 'Participation Dynamics' section, it is argued that mainstream news provides a disservice to the same disengaged group of people described above.

Nick Anstead, Ben O'loughlin and Lawrence Ampofo analysed tweets about opinion polls following the party leaders' TV show debates, in the 2010 UK General Election. Interesting results included examples of people (the 'viewertariat') educating each other ('lay tutelage') about polling and statistical sampling. This chapter also includes an interesting description of a previous piece of research about trust in the media, in which working class people noticed the disjuncture between their lives and media portrayal; multilingual and migrant communities read papers in various languages and expect each paper to deliver a perspective, rather than a truth; and an English-speaking white 'majority' expect mainstream news to deliver factual accounts. The writers do not elaborate on the relationship between the two studies, but are generous in including this interesting output from the earlier research.

This partners nicely with Joanna Redden's frames analysis of coverage of poverty in mainstream and alt-news sites in the UK and Canada (though the two chapters are not presented sequentially in the book). Redden's analysis indicates that mainstream media tend to frame poverty as the fault of the poor, whereas alt-media frame poverty as a side effect of the financial system. Alt-news sites seem to be the modern equivalent of radical press, but do not score well in search engine results and so do not reach a wide audience. A chapter on search engines and democracy would be a valuable addition to this book.

The studies set in Italy are a particularly enjoyable part of the book; research from English-speaking and Northern European countries can seem to dominate the English-language research environment. In one of these welcome dispatches (see also Ascheroni above) Cristian Vaccaria describes how Italian newspapers and TV stars used online tools to gather support against certain initiatives of then prime minister, Berlusconi. La Repubblica, for example, started to host ePetitions. Citizens were enabled to support these media initiatives in a very limited number of ways (sign petition, promote event), a more traditional level of control than is typically associated with social media.

Vaccaria's study, like so many in the book, is of its time – the data collection time of a few years ago, rather than the publication time, in early 2012. While hype about social media has levelled off to a constant drone, people's use of social media has massively expanded, especially through mobile access. Two fifths of UK adults now own a smartphone, with the same proportion saying their phone is the most important device for accessing the internet [5]. Government organisations are trying to use social media to interact with citizens, though popular social networks are generally still blocked by public sector filters. At the same time, privacy concerns have moved beyond bullying to surveillance [5,

6]. Here lies the problem with the dissemination of research on this topic in book format. Interesting studies to support debate at a symposium in 2010, become historical snapshots of intersections between democracy and technology in 2012.

In the traditions of saving the best till last, and of inserting puns in paper titles, the final chapter 'How the Internet is Giving Birth (to) a New Social Order' is based on a participant observation study of online communities formed on three pregnancy sites. Jodi Cohena and Jennifer Raymond's contribution is rich with observations about online behaviour. For example, they notice that a stronger camaraderie is evident in 'like you' forums than in larger, more general, forums. The chapter also brings the concept of self-actualizing citizenship home, as forum participants create their own online society and mini public, supporting and empowering each other to understand and govern their own pregnancies, if necessary challenging their medical providers, rather than fading into a convenient maternal sacrifice and suffering in silence.

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