New media, old politics? (Polis Summer School Paper)

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New media is still a prisoner of old politics. Despite the claims for enpowering people, the evidence is that blogs, Twitter and online activism replicates rather than revolutionises politics. That is the argument of this paper by Vanessa Gottlieb, a Polis Summer School student. She describes the many ways that new media can enhance democracy but suggests that so far, it is still limited by the context it operates in. Indeed, new media communications themselves are still not open or democratic enough to challenge existing political structures.

Do New media technologies and practices increase the ability of citizens to express themselves and so give them more political power?

By Vanessa Gottlieb

Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign website declares that it is "connecting and empowering all Americans through technology and innovation." The Obama campaign's use of new media in various forms—online campaigning, e-mails, podcasts—is in fact often cited to illustrate the ways in which new technologies are changing traditional power structures. To be sure, media is integral to political life, so as changes in technology have drastically altered communication, the political arena has also changed. Lower and sometimes non-existent barriers to entry have given many citizens the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns, have restructured political campaigns, and have even challenged national boundaries. But in what ways and to what extent do new media technologies and practices politically empower citizens?

Does the diffusion of new media advance democracy? Though many scholars in the past decade have enthusiastically concluded that new media are reinvigorating democracy by transforming the processes of political deliberation, a closer analysis reveals a more ambiguous picture, including a myriad of important limitations on and challenges to the new media's capacity for political empowerment, as well as its scope.

What Is New About New Media?

In order to properly analyze the new media's importance we must first define the term. In other words, as Roger Silverstone asks in the title of his influential compilation, "*What's new about new media?*"Answering his own question, Silverstone attributes the newness to "principally but not exclusively digital technologies," and the ways in which these technologies "do new things." He continues, "They give us new powers. They create new consequences for us as human beings. They bend minds. They transform institutions. They liberate" (Silverstone 11). Ronald Rice elaborates with the rather more technical definition that,

New media are (currently) new to the extent that they combine (1) computing (which allows processing of content, such as retrieval through associations of words or other indices, and structuring of communication, such as conversational threads in newsgroups), (2) telecommunication networks (which allow access and connectibility to diverse and otherwise distant other people and content), and (3) digitization of content (which allows transference across distribution networks, reprocessibility of the content as data, and integration and presentation of multiple modes such as text, audio, and video (Silverstone 24-25).

Bottom-Up Model

These technological advances have drastically lowered the costs of producing and disseminating information, creating an environment in which the traditional top-down model of media power is being superceded by a bottom-up model in which many different groups now have the means to organize and voice their opinions and concerns.

As Dan Gillmoe explains in his article "We the Media," "The rules of newsmakers, not just journalists have changed, thanks to everyone's ability to make the news" (Gillmor 45). The result is a new kind of participatory media, what Charlie Beckett calls "Supermedia," media empowered by citizen participation. If anyone can make the news, the result is also the democratization of media, a channel of communication that was previously reserved for elites. Sonia Livingstone explains that these developments, "can be construed as part of a general trend towards democratization – at least in terms of making visible forms of knowledge and opinion whose domain has been traditionally restricted to higher status groups" (Silverstone 62-3). The claim of many scholars, then, has been that, by extension, the new media strengthens our democracy.

Inspired Hope

Scholars point to a strengthening of democracy in several ways. In the most basic sense, it can be argued that until the appearance of new media democracy had long been hindered by the absence of direct and open bilateral channels of communication between citizens and their representatives (Silverstone 67). As Stephen Coleman notes, "The emergence of new media driven by a technologically inherent propensity towards interactivity has inspired hope of providing a channel for the revivification of a public sphere congenial to the democratic process" (Silverstone 69). Indeed, the new media have contributed to a democratization of the public sphere by increasing access to information, connecting people across distance, and increasing transparency. Lower operation costs also mean that political organization is facilitated at the grass-roots level, bypassing formal (hierarchical and regulated) formal organization and therefore bypassing elites.

Significantly, there are studies that indicate the presence of new channels of communication has increased new channels of political participation at a time when traditional participation in many places has declined." This kind of 'unmediated,' more democratic participation leads scholars to argue that the new media are creating greater political power for citizens and a more participatory politics. In other words, the conclusion is that new media are in the process of transforming representative democracy into an increasingly participative or even "direct" democracy.

China and Iran

In non-democratic countries, the vast majority, the new media are also seen as playing a subversive role, contributing to freedom of expression under authoritarian regimes and challenging existing power structures. Coleman notes that though Chinese internet is licensed by the state and publishing is censored, "it is quite impossible for the government to prevent citizens with Internet access from receiving information from exiled dissidents" (Silverstone 73). Similarly, in the context of the Iranian elections, where *The New York Times* proclaimed, "Web Pries Lid of Iranian Censorship," we see various forms of new media interacting (mobile phone photos sent through the internet) to combat state repression.

Yet despite all of its potential, such a utopian conception of the new media's power to empower all and reinvigorate democracy is tempered by the constraints of our reality. The new media's democratization potential can be challenged in a number of ways. In the first place, Silverstone notes that new media does not occur in a vacuum and brings with it many of the political, economic, and social constraints of our era as well as some old power structures.

He explains, "The power that we know to be exercised within global capitalism cannot just simply be ignored once we enter the new media age and venture into cyberspace. Knowledge is still grounded in experience. Language is still a political and not just a social fact" (Silverstone 11-2). Attached to Silverstone's idea are the continuing constraints of editors and site owners on the openness of online journalism.

Enpowerment Tool

In addition, Philip Howard presents the idea of a 'managed citizen,' a view that new media as a tool of empowerment is not so one sided in the favor of citizens, and that elites can and do use new media to manipulate the public. The risk, then, is that this new media merely embodies political culture and reinforces existing social inequalities.

Commenting on new media usage in the Obama campaign, Daniel Crease notes first that new media was still highly institutionalized, centered on fundraising and mobilization "to service the ends of the campaign."

Crease also presents an environment of "give and take," in which new media creates agency for citizens, in that they can use the system as a platform for campaigning across distance, but in return the agent-citizen is "controlled at a distance," since the everything he does is recorded in the campaign database. The result, according to Crease, is that one gains "agency in fundraising but not in deliberation."

Cost of Democracy

Out of the democratic context the limitations on the potential of new media as a force of democracy are greater still. In addition to language barriers and a landscape that often privileges English, there are the problems of low literacy rates and access to new media in general. Perhaps most importantly, new media is a purely technological phenomenon, and technology is expensive, often prohibitively so. As Coleman observes, "The cost of a computer is equal to approximately half the average Bangladeshi annual wage" (Silverstone 73). Similarly, Howard found that in Tajikistan the high cost of internet take-up impedes its disempowered citizens from having internet access.

As a result, "This new media structures inequality through cost." Although this is not always purposeful on the part of the state, it is, like Silverstone argued, the reality of existing international and capitalistic structures. Thus, as in a democratic context, there is a concern that new media may reinforce entrenched elites, because they are the citizens who have access. Furthermore, though in some cases citizens in non-democratic countries find independence from the state through cell phones and youtube, the problems of censorship, including self-censorship, cannot be entirely circumvented. Youtube is banned in both China and Turkey, and in Iran possession of a camera phone is punishable by law.

The result is that new media often reinforces the power of the Western media, because it is not so much disseminating information among local populations as spreading information to the West. The Iran protest photos, for example, were not published or viewed in Iran but sent to Western news sources. These constraints and others test the potential of new media as a tool of democratic empowerment in the places that need empowerment most.

Agent of freedom

New media certainly empower citizens as members of society by providing avenues for expression and encouraging societal participation through interactivity. New media in countries where press freedom is limited also serve as an important agent of freedom, exposing and facilitating the spread of truthful information and undermining authoritarian repression. Yet while in many ways new media technologies challenge existing power structures, it is not clear that they can overcome them.

In democracies these technologies are appropriated and used as much by those in power as they are by those who feel disempowered. In non-democratic countries, the prohibitively high cost of these technologies means that society's most disempowered often do not have access, and where they do new media as a tool for freedom of expression cannot yet compete with sheer physical force. So while new media has emerged as a tool for citizen empowerment and an avenue to challenge traditional power structures, their real effect on political power is often ambiguous and still depends heavily on their environment, on political, economic and social realities. Despite its novelty, new media are still media, and as such "are both context and themselves contextualized."

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