

Conceptualization and Perspectives on Social Media Effects on Online Political Participation: A Review

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Abstract

Social science phenomena are regularly faced with a myriad of debate among which are the issues of conceptualization and perspectives. These differing views come about as a result of differences in the scope, operationalization, methodology, objectives, time or socio cultural context of exiting social science researches. Expectedly, the concept of online political participation on social media in the digital age has also been affected by these debates. Social media has rapidly been adopted as a tool for political participation because online opportunities for such participation have become an important avenue for citizens' engagement in democracies. Consequently, increasing number of researches are being carried out in this area, thus creating differing views in terms of definitions and perspectives of the phenomena online political participation on social media. As a consequence, this paper attempts to elucidate arguments on these views by reviewing some existing studies in this area with a view to providing a clear understanding of this form of political participation on social media.

Keywords

Internet, social media, social media effects, online political participation, political communication

Introduction

Social media have become part of everyday life and used by millions of individuals worldwide (Afouxenidis, 2013). As a result its proliferation have transformed the political landscape (Bae, 2014). Evidently, political participation is one area where this change is most significant (Awopeju, 2012; Bryan, 2013; Mann, 2011; Varnali & Gorgulu, 2014).

Political participation is a hydra-headed phenomenon that encompass different forms of activities. Thus, scholars lack of consensus on the content and scope of this phenomena has led to differing views on conceptualization of the phenomena. Traditionally, the major problems associated with conceptualizing political participation are; ascribing political characteristics to

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any social behaviour, and strong presence of normative elements especially in studies of democratic societies. Hence, scholars have advocated that political participation should not encompass behaviour which are not political in nature. Also, conceptualization of political participation in the past (as activities aimed exclusively at affecting government actions, either directly or indirectly) has prevented scholars from fully understanding the multidimensional nature of political participation (Casteltrione, 2015). Consequently, Wajzer (2015) suggests the three major factors that should determine difference in conceptualizing political participation are; object of research, time of research, and sociocultural context in which researchers function.

Additionally, there is difference of opinion among scholars on the effect of social media on online political participation. Researches in the field have produced contrasting evidence and created strong academic debate. These debates focus on the role of new media in political participation. Notably, there are doubts concerning the use and effect of new media on political participation (Livingstone, Bober & Helsper, 2011). These doubts are evident in the inconsistencies in research findings on the issue. Specifically, Baumgartner and Morris (2010) and Charles (2010) have indicated that findings on the roles of The Internet in encouraging political participation have shown mixed results, while other researchers have indicated either positive (Optimistic view) or negative (Pessimistic view) results. As a result, Kenski & Stroud (2006) believe these inconsistencies may be due to methodological differences in researches on The Internet and political participation. Unfortunately, these debates did not end with The Internet but also extended to the relationship between social media and online political participation. This had led Casteltrione (2015) to suggest a move away from the polarized debate between optimists, pessimists and normalizer and the need for the adoption of a different approach to examining the effects of digital technology on political participation.

Consequently, this review was undertaken to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon online political participation on social media.

Political Participation in the Digital Age

The concept of online political participation on social media cannot be adequately captured without tracing its antecedent to The Internet. The Internet from its web 1.0 to web 2.0 technologies has affected the way politics works (Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013; Deursen, Dijk & Helsper, 2014; Iwokwagh & Okoro, 2012; Yamamoto & Kushin, 2013). This is not unconnected to the fact that The Internet is like a 'deliberative space' which can be highly democratic (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2008) thus adding to the tools of online participation among citizens (Ternes, Mittelstadt & Towers, 2014).

Thus, online political participation is basically political participation that takes place on The Internet. They are digital modes of participation which are categorised as non-conventional form of political participation. These nonconventional (also known as non-electoral or non-institutional) forms of participation have been on the increase since the last decade (Shore, 2014) such that Pattie, Seyd and Whitely (2003) noted that citizens have abandoned conventional forms (e.g. traditional voting) of political participation.

Therefore, the extent of increase in non-conventional forms of political participation has led scholars (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Shore, 2014; Vrablikova, 2014) to argue for the 'normalization of the unconventional'. As these new forms of political participation led to the emergence of a variety of activities now referred to as political participation thus making the democratic experience more diverse. Hence, citizens who engage in such activities like online discussion forum and emails have a higher possibility of being engaged in various forms of political actions than those who do not (Bae, 2014). Furthermore, there is increase use of The Internet to retrieve political information and also participate (Hoofman, 2012) making The Internet an important tool for political participation (Campante, Durante & Sobbrío, 2013).

This significant role played by The Internet in politics led to the emergence of concepts such as e-participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Grönlund & Wakabi 2015; Vincente & Novo, 2014), cyber-democracy (Chun, 2012), digital democracy (Hyun, 2012) and 'Netizens' (Olabamiji, 2014). The concept of e-participation is particularly important in the context of this review because it is an extension of political participation in a democratic process mediated by Information Communication Technology (ICT). Its aim is to support active citizenship with the latest technological development and increased access to participation tools in order to foster fair and efficient society and government (Vincente & Novo, 2014). As a result, the political lives of citizens and candidates have been strengthened by The Internet through interactivity, which is crucial to the functioning of democracy (Zhao, 2014).

Conceptualizing Online Political Participation on Social Media

Understanding the concept of online political participation entails demystifying how the concept has changed over the years. Since the late 1960s, the definition of political participation has transformed significantly from what it was decades ago (Gustafsson, 2012; Potgieter, 2013), most especially in terms of its historically narrow definition and scholars reference to electoral participation in the past. In the present age, the list of activities considered as political participation expands daily (Mann, 2011).

Historically, political participation was seen as an activity done to influence government decision (Salman & Saad, 2015). It is an activity that has the effect of influencing government action either directly, by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make these policies (Verba, Schlozman & Bradley,

1995). It was also seen by notable scholars like Verba *et al.* (1995) as government oriented activity, and not the citizen oriented form of today (Casteltrione 2015). However, these past definitions are too narrow as they focus on the mobilization aspect of political participation not putting into consideration such online political participation activities such as following political news or discussing political events among friends online.

Therefore, there is need for the development of a clear definition of political participation as older definitions are inadequate and incommensurate with the contemporary world which is digitized, multidimensional and complex (Norris, 2002). Equally, Fenton and Barassi (2011) advised that increased usage of social media for political participation calls for a reconsideration of the meaning of political participation in society. Clearly, traditional measure of political participation by influential writings of scholars like Verba *et al.* (1995) no longer encompasses the range of political participation activities available to the public today. There are now more ways to be active than what was available in previous generations. This change is brought about by the shift from how citizens participate in the past to what is obtainable today. Currently, political participation is a dynamic concept which traditional definitions cannot take care of, as they are too restrictive in the era of social media. Therefore, expanding the definition through conceptualization will allow for the inclusion of online political activities (Hooghe, 2014).

As a result, taking into consideration the increase in new forms of political participation and also noting that political activities can be drawn by different purposes (i.e. mobilization and communication), Casteltrione (2015) proposed a modern and current definition of political participation. He defined it as a set of activities influencing or aiming to influence governments' actions and other individuals' political behaviour and/or reflecting individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics. This definition covers a wealth of activities as it includes mobilization oriented activities as well as more personalized and communicative forms of political participation such as consumption of political information and political consumerism.

It is noteworthy that conceptualizing online political participation on social media requires distinguishing first generation The Internet (Web 1.0) use for political participation from social media (Web 2.0) use for political participation (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). This is because The Internet has a passive political influence on users' behaviour while social media has a more active influence. The influence of social media results from features such as interactivity which makes it different from first generation Internet applications.

Hence, with the rising role of social media in politics, participation has taken new forms. For example, an individual clicking the 'like' button on a Facebook profile to indicate political preferences in terms of politician, political party or political movement is now considered as participation. Just as

political participation activities such as posting messages with political content on social media or joining discussion on social media have become widespread over the years (Hooghe, 2014). Changes like these led to an increase in the number of activities included in the definition of political participation.

Thus, the debate around digital modes of political participation today centers around two main issues. First, critics believe that most online activities do not go beyond communicative acts; or they are simply dismissed as 'clicktivism' (Hooghe, 2014) or 'slacktivism' (Chun, 2012). Second, is the decision on whether political participation on social media could be likened to offline political acts, or distinctively online political acts (Christensen, 2012). Understandably, the first debate borders on the fact that since the classical definition of political participation is activities to influence government action either directly or indirectly (Hooghe, 2014). Consequently, whether political participation on social media is seen as a mere communicative act or not, so long as it influences government action or decision, then it can be considered as political participation. This line of thought is in congruence with the definition of political participation by Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zuniga (2012) as activities aimed at influencing government action whether online or offline.

Obviously, in light of recent social and technological changes, political participation is increasingly personalized and occurs largely outside the domain of institutionalized policy making. It encompasses a wider set of phenomena than it was before, thus political participation activities online can now be seen as less instrumental, but more expressive. This is not surprising because all political acts (whether online or offline) involves some form of communication. Besides, Olabamiji (2014) avers that communication is the center of all political activities, just as Verba *et al.* (1995) states that political participatory activities are inherently "information-rich" acts. Similarly, Livingstone, Bober and Helsper (2011) noted that individuals are engaged in a wide range of communication activities that could be considered participation. Likewise, Valenzuela (2013) who avers that several researchers have categorized political expression as a form of political participation rather than a precursor to it. As a result, it could be deduced that political opinions can be expressed outside the voting booth and are also important components of a healthy democracy (Moy, Torres, Tanaka & McCluskey, 2005).

Moreover, embedded in the definition of democracy is a form of participation where there is freedom to publicly express views on political issues freely (Potgieter, 2013). These debates by scholars on the features of online political participation further portends the need for an updated definition of political participation. Perhaps, operational definition of online political participation on social media as suggested by Van Deths (2014) may be an adequate solution to this need. Though, when operationalizing, Hooghe (2014) suggests the inclusion of political motivation. This is because motivation is an important component which must be present if the activity is used to 'express

political aims and intentions of the participant'. Political motivation makes it possible to include online political participation activities resulting from the swiftly developing ICTs as forms of political participation. Therefore, online political participation such as posting comments, opinions, information, audio and visual materials on social media can be accommodated in the concept of political participation as long as they are directed at the expression of a political motive. This, Hooghe believes will provide answers to the debate on the participatory character of online political activities.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the boundaries of motivations, aims and intentions are quite blurred. This makes it problematic to draw a clear line between participation and non-participation. This is because motivation can only be defined by the person involved and it may be difficult to determine if individuals participate for personal or political reasons. Fortunately, political acts backed by political motivation are sometimes relatively easy to determine on social media, however, this is not absolute. For example, posting messages expressing disappointment in a government policy clearly shows political aim, however, 'liking' a political message sent by a Facebook contact may be for a political aim or could just be that the participant is being nice to a friend by supporting his cause. Hence it is important to operationalize political motivations (Hooge, 2014).

Furthermore, the concept of political communication as noted earlier is another reason why operationalization is important (Van Beths, 2014). Literature has shown that a significant number of activities now count as online political participation. For example, some scholars (Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2011) see political information seeking on social media as a form of political participation, whereas, others see following political events in news and discussion about politics as communication activities (Casteltrione 2015). This different opinion may be because in the past, offline versions of political information seeking are traditionally seen as political communication and thus not considered as political participation. However, Hoffman (2012) maintains that in the case of online activities, the boundaries of political participation and political communication is quite difficult to draw as these activities are by definition communicative.

Evidently, without a more elaborate conceptualization of political motivations such communicative acts as political information seeking on social media may not be regarded as participation (Hooghe, 2014). Thus, seeking and sharing political news or commenting on these contents may traditionally not be seen as political participation as they lack the motivation of expressing a political purpose at first glance. However on social media such activities can be seen, read or viewed by a large group of people due to high connectivity on these platforms. This makes it have a higher chance of reaching and motivating citizens in these networks. Besides, they also make it possible for the sender's

political belief and intention to be expressed. As a result, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) maintains that attention to political news and sharing of political news take on a more instrumental quality once they are performed online. Hence 'upgrading' these activities from the level of communicative acts to genuine participatory acts.

Equally, Strandberg (2013) agrees that online political participation on social media has strengthened citizens' position in the communicative system and increased participatory activities at the expense of traditional forms of participation. Hence citizen's political acts on Twitter can be regarded as a form of political participation (Hosch-Dayican, Amrit, Aarts & Dassen, 2014). Similarly, Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison and Lampe (2011) found that the most common political activity on Facebook is posting politically oriented wall posts or status update. These forms of political participation are of course traditionally communicative acts. Therefore it can be deduced that quite a number of communicative acts on social media can now be operationally defined as political participatory acts.

To the second debate on digital modes of participation, Charles (2010) sees online political behavior as an extension of offline political participation. In contrast, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) and Valenzuela (2013) believe online and offline acts are separate activities that occur in different scenarios. Hence it is important to operationalize them in a research to avoid methodological errors. This is because even though online political participation activities look like their offline counterpart, they might not occupy the same sphere of activity. For instance, sending a letter to a politician could count as political participation, likewise sending a tweet to the same politician. In as much as the former is communicated to a smaller audience and the latter to a larger audience, it still counts as political participation. However, the latter is more complex than the former, showing online political participation activities are more complex in nature than their offline counterparts. This makes classification of online acts quite difficult. Hence, it is important to properly operationalize online political participation and its sub categories for effective measurement in future studies.

Perceptions of Social Media Effects on Online Political Participation

Debates on effect of social media on online political participation can be traced to similar arguments on the effect on The Internet on online political participation. Unequivocally, there are three schools of thought on the relationship between The Internet and political participation (Casteltrione, 2015). Some scholars believe The Internet has positive impact on political participation (Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Tolbert & McNeal, 2002). This argument is supported by Boulianne (2009) who in a meta-analysis of 38 studies with 166 effects found that The Internet has positive effect on political participation because it reduces the cost of accessing political information and makes it more convenient to participate in politics. These group of scholars are

known as the optimists because they are in support of the mobilization thesis of The Internet.

On the other hand, the proponents of the second group hold that the power of the Internet in mobilization is low and stress the tendency of The Internet to reinforce existing participatory trends (Calenda & Maijer, 2009; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Moy *et al.*, 2005; Norris, 2001, 2002 & Wang, 2007). These are known as the normalizers who believe in the reinforcement potentials of The Internet.

The third group of scholars are the pessimists who believe The Internet has little or even negative influence on political participation (Scheufele, Nisbert, & Brossard, 2003). Thus, despite the positive roles played by The Internet in political participation, these group of scholars have reported that there is nothing inherently democratic about The Internet. These group of scholars are the pessimists.

In the same vein, a similar scenario played itself with the relationship between social media and political participation (Casteltrione, 2015). This occurrence lends credence to the position of scholars that the ability of The Internet to reinforce or mobilize participation is still relevant after over a decade as it can also be applied to social media (Stranberg, 2014). Although it is widely assumed that social media have the potential to positively transform the way the public participate in politics (Dimitrova & Bystrom, 2013), this revolutionary potential is still a matter of debate. As a result, just as in the case of the relationship between The Internet and political participation, there are contrasting evidence in relation to social media and political participation.

Therefore, Bekafigo and McBride (2013) and Porter (2014) notes a look at the relationship between social media and political participation brings to the fore some important arguments. Specifically, these arguments bother on whether social media use for political participation has a negative or positive impact (Dagona, Karick & Abubakar, 2013), or in another sense whether it has mobilization or reinforcement potential (Deursen, Djik & Helsper, 2014; Kruikemeier, Van Noort, Vliegthart & De Vreese, 2014; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Valenzuela, Kim & Gil de Zuniga, 2012). Some scholars believe it has mobilizing effect (Towner, 2013; Xenos, Vromen and Loader, 2014), others reinforcement (Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Gustafson, 2012; Raine & Smith, 2012, Vitak *et al.*, 2011), while some believe it has limited or negative influence (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Valenzuela *et al.* 2009) on political participation.

Researchers like Yamamoto and Kushin (2013), Kruikemeier, Noort, Vliegthart and De Vresse (2014), Xenos *et al.* (2014) have reported mixed results on the ability of social media to foster political participation. On the optimistic side is a positive relationship and on the pessimistic side is a negative relationship. Relatedly, Oser, Hooghe and Marien (2012) have raised concerns that while increased social media access and use promotes the

mobilization thesis, they could also widen the gap between those who participate and those who do not participate online. The reason for this could be because new media technologies have no predictable and absolute positive or negative effects.

In contrast, mobilization (expansionary) theorists (Stranberg, 2013; Carlisle & Patton, 2013) opine that, even though social media may not result in direct behavioural changes, it represents a critical aspect of the political participation process from a democratic participation perspective since they make citizens feel empowered and involved in the political process. Also Stranberg (2013) avers that social media leads to political engagement of citizens including non-active users who have no strong interest in politics and those who accidentally encounter political content on it. Equally, Carlisle and Patton (2013) and Chun (2012) reports that social media has become a new mobilization tool for gathering and coordinating citizens on important political issues. Just as, Oser, Hooghe and Marien (2012) stress that online political participation via social media is a unique kind of participation that has the power to recruit disadvantaged and traditionally disengaged citizens even more than the advantaged ones.

Furthermore, in a micro-level analysis of Korean youths by Chun (2012), he reveals that social media has mobilized new people into the political process, hence, rejecting the reinforcement thesis. Similarly, in a meta-analysis of 36 studies with 170 effects, Boulianne (2015) found an overall positive relationship between social media use and political participation with over 80% positive coefficient, albeit only half of the coefficients were statistically significant. Conversely, reinforcement theorists believe interaction via social media is weak and can have no significant effect in boosting reductions in political participation. Thus, it has no genuine mobilization capacity for political participation. Supporting this view, Bekafigo and McBride (2013), Gil de Zuniga, Puig-I-Abril and Rojas (2009) and Wang (2007) maintains social media is not a mobilizing tool for new political participation but rather a reinforcement of older traditional political participation format where the young, poor and uneducated are left behind. Hence, social media will not stimulate new citizens to become politically involved (Kruikemeier, Noort, Vliegthart & De Vresse, 2014), rather it is just one more tool for citizens already politically engaged (Kirk & Shill, 2011).

Conclusion

This article offers a review of discussions on social media and online political participation with special attention to its conceptualization and perspectives on its effects. Evidently, the positions of various scholars on the issue understudy were presented. Specifically, the review indicated that in terms of conceptualization, the reason for differences in viewpoints on the issue of social media and online political participation could be as a result of context of research or operationalization of the concept of political participation. Also

noteworthy is that in terms of perspectives, among the three school of thought (optimist/mobilizers, normalizers/reinforcers and pessimist/negative) on the effect of social media on online political participation, the mobilizers seem to have the most support even though there is no conclusive evidence on their side. Consequently, future studies should identify the position of the argument in which their study is situated to further clarify and expand researches on online political participation on social media in the digital age.

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