

Social Media and Democracy: New Challenges for Political Communication Research

26-27 October 2017

Symposium organized by the University of Copenhagen and Lund University



Just within the past two years, several extraordinary political events occurred that pose significant challenges for traditional politics. Most prominently, Britain's pledge to leave the European Union and the election (and subsequent administration) of Donald Trump chart the future of Western democracy on an uncertain course. Given the increasing influence of digital communication technologies on both electoral and extra-parliamentary politics, the 2-day symposium aims to explore the nexus between social media and contemporary European politics by asking the overarching question:

How is social media influencing political processes, and what implications does this bear on the future of democracy? How should political communication research respond to the challenges raised by these real-world developments?

Social media may affect democracy both in a positive and in a negative way. Positively, social media may increase the level of political information, awareness, and participation of citizens and grant smaller parties a better chance at reaching voters (especially in

Proportional Representation systems). It may also increase the degree of social cohesion among certain social groups and give marginalized groups a voice. Negatively, for many of the same reasons, social media may be a fertile ground for the radicalization of public opinion, for the unbridled circulation of false information, radical propaganda, and extremist mobilization. The present symposium explores both these avenues in order to improve our understanding of the nexus between social media and democracy.

Theories of political communication highlight the interaction between three actor-types – political, media, and citizens – as an integral component for a healthy and vibrant liberal democracy. With a specific focus on democracy, the symposium invites academics to present their own perspectives and engage in dialogue with one another about the impact of social media on contemporary politics focusing on these three main actor categories, each constituting the theme of a symposium panel. The final round of presentations will look into the future avenues of political communication research and the promises and challenges it faces.

DAY 1, 26 October (Copenhagen)

10-12 Panel 1: Media

Liliana Bounegru (Ghent U/
U Groningen)

Damian Trilling (U Amsterdam)

Jakob Ohme (Syddansk U)

Tom Moylan (Social Media
Consultant)

12:15 – 13:15 LUNCH

13:30 – 15:30 Panel 2: Politicians

Jakob Svensson (Malmö U)

Kristof Jacobs (Radboud U)

Michael Bossetta (U Copenhagen)

15:30 – 16:00 COFFEE BREAK

16:15 – 18:00 KEYNOTE ADDRESSES (open to the public)

Joshua Tucker (NYU)

Homero Gil de Zuñiga (U Vienna)

18:30 DINNER

DAY 2, 27 October (Lund)

10:45 COFFEE

11-13 Panel 3: Citizens

Dan Mercea (City U, London)

Homero Gil de Zuñiga (U Vienna)

Christina Neumayer (ITU
Copenhagen)

13:15 -14:15 LUNCH

14:30 – 17:00 Roundtable:

Challenges and Opportunities

Political Communication Research

Anamaria Dutceac Segesten (Lund U)

Nick Monaco (U Oxford/ Google)

Pascal Jürgens (U Mainz)

Joshua Tucker (NYU)

18:30 DINNER

PRESENTATION TITLES & ABSTRACTS

Joshua Tucker

Keynote Address: **Tumultuous Technology: Social, Politics, and Democracy**

Panel presentation: **Trumping Hate on Twitter? Online Hate Speech and White Nationalist Rhetoric in the 2016 US Election Campaign and its Aftermath**

Homero Gil de Zuñiga

Keynote Address: **Second Screening Contentious Politics. Political Information, Discussion, Expression, Persuasion & Participation**

Liliana Bounegru

Some Provocations about Fake News

In this talk, I present findings, challenges and lessons learned from a series of collaborative research projects examining fake news as a digital culture phenomenon. The projects were undertaken by the Public Data Lab, an interdisciplinary network convening researchers from digital humanities, media studies, Internet studies, digital sociology, and science and technology studies to facilitate research, public debate and engagement around the future of the data society. The talk draws on two publications. The first is "A Field Guide to Fake News", which explores the use of digital methods to trace the production, circulation and reception of fake news online and which received media mentions in the New York Times, BuzzFeed News, NRC, Der Standard and Columbia Journalism Review. The second is "Five Provocations About Fake News", a forthcoming research article drawing on insights and cautionary tales from science and technology studies to challenge some of the themes and assumptions that underlie current research and debates around fake news and proposing some concepts and analytical lenses to support future empirical social research around this topic.

Damian Trilling

Algorithms, social ties, and own choices: Political information in a post-paper world

Scholars of political communication have traditionally used survey question about citizens media use to explain political attitudes and behaviour. For instance, questions like "How often do you watch the evening news?", "How often do you read a newspaper?" or sometimes, more specifically, "How often do you read paper X/watch TV show Y?" are used as a proxy measure for inferring to which content people have been exposed. Nowadays, however, many people get exposed to news via social media or via news recommender systems. Many have argued that these personalized news diets are opposed to a healthy democracy: They could lead to a fragmentation of the public, in which a common core of issues, shared by all recipients of the major news media, vanishes. Methodologically, this might also lead to an "era of minima effects" (Bennet & Iyengar, 2008), in which we are unable to discern media effects with the mass-media era survey questions

sketched above. In this presentation, I will challenge this vision by showing which counter-acting forces limit the tendencies towards so-called filter bubbles and selective exposure, but will also address methodological innovations that can help us study exposure to political information in today's media landscape.

Jakob Ohme

Political actors on social media: attacking the news media's supremacy of informing the public?

What is the first thing more and more citizens nowadays do for getting additional information about a person, an organization or a brand they have an interest in? They like it, follow it or add it to their preferred social media channel. This initial selection of sources with the intention of an automated, ongoing information delivery to a newsfeed works well for fashion brands, musicians and holiday destinations. However, is it an effective possibility for political parties and actors to reach out to the public?

This talk discusses the increasing relevance of direct political communication and micro-targeting on social media platforms and its implications for news media and public opinion formation. I will present data from a panel study in Denmark, describing how successful political actors are in appearing in citizens' political media diet. Differences regarding age groups and between election vs. non-election times suggest that news media's supremacy of informing the public may be increasingly challenged by direct political communication via social media in the future.

Tom Moylan

Just Don't Create a Scandal: A Day in the Life of a Social Media Manager

Working in social media for an institution, a politician or any other organisation in the public sphere can be pretty intense. On the same post you can be accused of being a market-destroying communist authoritarian and a right-wing neoliberal dismantling the welfare state. You are sent heartbreaking stories, racist tirades, disgusting photos and occasionally people even say something nice.

You are on the front lines of receiving and responding to public opinion, sometimes you're even involved in shaping it – and for many citizens you are the only direct contact point they have for those governing them. From attempting to build an informed and engaged audience to just trying to have a little fun with your community, this talk will discuss some of the practical challenges and opportunities we encounter as political communicators on social media.

Christina Neumayer

Social Movements, Social Media, Data and Materialities

This talk will critically discuss activists' social media tactics and how these materialize at the intersection of social media materialities and activist agency. Based on an empirical and conceptual discussion, we examine social media-oriented approaches to the study of social movements. What do these data render visible and invisible? What are the methodological, analytical and ethical challenges? Social media data can demonstrate patterns of activity and shed light on online social networks. However, activists engage in self-censorship or are being censored, and the materialities of social media may privilege spectacular images over content that illuminates larger political issues. This means that important participants, content, and tactics are hidden from research that is based purely on social media data. Moreover, activist communication is transformed into a commodity on social media, prompting ethical concerns. Addressing challenges and opportunities of using social media data in social movement studies,

the talk concludes by discussing how research based on social media data may shed light on challenges activists face when navigating social media materialities.

Kristof Jacobs

Politicians and New Technologies: Do they know what they're doing?

The role of Cambridge Analytica in Donald Trump's Presidential campaign and that of Blue State Digital in Obama's successful campaigns has attracted a lot of media attention. Both marketing agencies themselves are quick to point out the added value of their approach (and their advice). Regardless of their success and whether correlation should be seen as causation in these instances, it is clear that both agencies had a strategy.

However, it remains to be seen whether outside of these extreme cases, ordinary parties have strategies tailored to new technologies and whether these strategies 'land' with their politicians. Some studies have tried to study the strategies of politicians but the dominant methodology in the field (studying content) can at best only partially assess the simple question whether or not politicians know what they are doing.

This presentation will dig deeper into that question. It will also address two related questions, a methodological and a more normative one. Regarding methodology, I will address how we as scientists can best study the strategies of politicians and parties. Regarding the normative implications, I will address the question whether some parties are better at adapting to new technologies and what this means for our contemporary democracies.

Michael Bossetta

The Digital Architectures of Social Media: How Technological Design Influences Political Campaigning

This talk introduces the argument that political campaigning on social media is impacted by a platform's digital architecture: the technical, back-end protocols that facilitate and constrain user behavior in a virtual space. Using the 2016 U.S. presidential primaries as a case, I compare the digital architectures of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat in relation to a model of political marketing developed from interviews with digital directors from four Republican campaigns (Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, Rand Paul, and Scott Walker). The results of a mixed-methods analysis of campaign-issued content and user engagement metrics are then presented, in order to empirically illustrate how the technological design of a social media platform influences the way it is appropriated for campaigning by politicians and citizens.

Jakob Svensson

Swedish parties on Instagram

In this presentation, Dr. Svensson will present results from two studies, one of Swedish political parties during the latest 2014 general elections and one study from an in-between election period in 2016. The results suggest that Instagram (regardless of being more visual oriented) is used in a similar manner as Facebook and Twitter (i.e. for mobilisation and image management) and that uses are centered on election campaigning.

Dan Mercea

Identity, Locality, Organisation and Their Interactions in Transnational Activism

In this talk, I discuss the question of whether transnational activism supporting national protest attains a cohesive collective identity on social media whilst organizationally remaining localized. It examines a corpus of social media data collected in the course of two months of rolling protests in 2013 against the largest proposed open-cast gold mine at Roşia Montană, Romania, which echoed among Romanian expatriates. A network text analysis of the data supplemented with interview findings revealed concerns with protest logistics as common across the transnational networks of protest localities on both Facebook and Twitter, a finding that testified to the coordinated character of the protests. On the other hand, collective identity emerged as the fruit of attempts to surmount localized protest experiences of geographically disparate but civically-minded social media users.

Homero Gil de Zuñiga

Lights and Shadows of Social Media Influence over Civil Life

Does social media use facilitate and foster democratic desirable outcomes? If so, under what circumstances social media may facilitate this process? For instance, how are social media, political expression and political participation linked? Alternatively, what other possible negative outcomes may also be increasing due to social media use? In this talk, I will discuss the impact of social media on democratic outcomes from two very different perspectives with antagonizing empirical outcomes, showcasing the *lights and shadows of social media influence over civil life*.

Pascal Jürgens

Reality is What You Make of It: The Challenging Disintegration of the Unified Online Sphere

In 1998, Sir Tim Berners-Lee famously pleaded that “Cool URIs don’t change”: Content on the web should always remain accessible through one and exactly one address. Almost twenty years later, nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, we are rapidly moving to a world where everything online is different for everybody, all the time. Personalized sites are tailored to user preferences, posts and comments are edited, hidden or deleted as time goes by, and every bit of information has an abundance of copies, variants and remixes.

The resulting challenges to empirical methods are huge: It has become virtually impossible to gather representative samples of online data and, even worse, even those samples often do not reflect what users see! Taking stock of current approaches to digital methods, I will argue that many widely-used practices will soon become obsolete because of new technologies, changing user behavior and declining access to APIs. However, by embracing the disjunctive nature of the new web, we can expand our set of methods to secure scientific access, bolster precision and develop new theoretical avenues.

Nick Monaco

Taiwan is a country with a rich history and cultural ties to mainland China. Even though there has been much research and effort dedicated to propaganda and censorship in the People’s Republic of China over the years, less attention has been paid to the digital propaganda sphere in Taiwan. This presentation explores computational propaganda in Taiwan and finds that digital propaganda in Taiwan can be divided into two types: (1) internal propaganda on domestic political issues and campaigns and (2) cross-Strait propaganda — emanating from the mainland and promoting reunification of the two countries. Furthermore, recent computational and social

research points to manual propaganda being the main method used in campaigns in both countries. The uses of two political bots in Taiwan, an anti-fake news bot and an intelligence-gathering crawler bot used in a 2014 electoral campaign, are explored in detail. Taiwan is and will continue to be an interesting case study for the future of computational propaganda worldwide, especially with an eye to competition between liberal democratic and authoritarian narratives and ideologies.