Civic Engagement: How Can Digital Technology Encourage Greater Engagement in Civil Society?

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The formal mechanisms of democracy rely on strong civic engagement for their legitimacy and efficacy. An electorate that is not widely interested in the actions of its representatives, that does not participate in their election, and that does not hold them to account provides an inadequate basis for democracy. Of course, it is not enough that individuals have the interest, motivation and opportunities to engage as active stakeholders in democratic life. Citizens must also have the necessary information and evidence – and the skills to engage critically with these – to make informed and empowered decisions. Equally, strong civil society implies not only that there be high rates of engagement with, and participation in, national and local elections, but also that individual members of society take a proactive role in shaping and contributing to public life more broadly. Historic events such as the French Revolution, the women's suffrage movement in Britain and the American Civil Rights Movement show

that the most profound transformations of the political structure and public sphere are often the result of action originating outside of the walls of political institutions, driven by civil society.

But civic engagement should be thought of not only as participation in the seismic political shifts achieved by social movements such as these. Citizens can contribute effectively to society in a diverse range of ways, which include not only voting, political petitions and protest, but also, for example, representation on local health and care bodies, school boards and parish councils; participation in campaign groups; or financial or in-kind donations to charitable causes. Indeed, public satisfaction with political processes depends in part on having a broad scope and range of mechanisms for engagement, to enable citizens to participate to the extent, at the level, and in the ways that they prefer.[1]

Today, it is widely recognised that digital technologies offer exciting opportunities to facilitate a stronger and more inclusive

civil society. Around the world, energetic and wide-ranging efforts are being made to harness the potential of digital technologies to mobilise civic action at local, national and international levels (see Box 1. above for one example). At the same time, we are only just beginning to understand the impacts that digital technologies may have on the norms and nature of public life, and the significant and complex challenges that these impacts may pose for societal cohesion and democracy.

The opportunities are exciting, but the challenges are significant and complex

Social media and online activism: Citizen-driven use of digital technologies for engagement and participation

The growth of the Internet has had an unprecedented impact on the flow of information worldwide, and the rapid spread of social media technologies has had a particularly seismic effect on the ways in which we access and consume information, interact and relate to others. The ability to connect with global communities, and to both receive and contribute information as part of these networks, may be seen to be shifting the power that has historically been concentrated among traditional print media and government bodies, toward individual members of society. WikiLeaks represents a prominent, and controversial, example of how civil society may take advantage of these opportunities. With perhaps greater pertinence to everyday life, online social networks have enabled users to find and connect with people like themselves across the globe, facilitating the development of powerful communities of individuals who may have struggled to access the same kind and level of peer support and engagement in their offline interactions. Social media has thus given a platform and voice to traditionally marginalised individuals and communities.[3] Mobilisation around particular issues has been facilitated by online petition platforms such as 38 Degrees,[4] Change.org[5] and Avaaz[6] (see Box 2. below). Crowdfunding sites enable fundraising efforts at a global level for projects which can be local or international in scope – indicative of a broader trend which has seen private philanthropy and entrepreneurship take a greater role in supporting social causes. Citizen journalism and digital activism have provided oxygen for the flames of social movements such as the Arab Spring and the Black

Box 2. Online petition and campaign platforms

38 Degrees, Change.org and Avaaz are some of the most prominent examples of civil society online petition and campaign platforms. Individuals and organisations may use these platforms to create petitions, mobilise the support of global audiences, and drive campaigns that involve both offline and online activities. Campaigns supported by these platforms have helped to achieve legislative and policy changes: in the UK, for example, a campaign to stop the government selling off national woodland recruited nearly half a million signatures and resulted in the scrapping of the plans (Allen 2016).

In 2010, the UK Government launched an online petition platform which offers a direct link to Parliament.[7] Petitions that recruit 10,000 signatures elicit a response from the government, and petitions that recruit 100,000 signatures are considered for debate in Parliament. The platform aims for greater transparency and accountability by informing signatories though email updates about the progress of the petitions that they have supported, and by making a record of government responses, as well as the transcripts and videos from parliamentary debates, available online.

Lives Matter campaign, and which have had significant and wide-ranging 'real world' impacts.

Equally transformative, however, has been the use of these same social media platforms to mobilise engagement with and participation in violent extremist groups, although experts have sought to emphasise that terrorist recruitment still hinges on offline interactions.[8] Nonetheless, the radicalisation of political opinion may be facilitated by digital platforms in a number of ways, and the effects may potentially be wider and less immediately obvious than the incidence of terrorist attacks. Although social media technologies allow users to communicate with individuals around the world – who represent a diversity of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives – algorithms play a powerful and obscure role in determining the information to which we are exposed online, often prioritising the types of content that we or our online peers have accessed before, at the expense of divergent views and insights. Indeed, concerns have been raised that, far from having been decentralised in favour of individual members of society, power is now concentrated among the tech giants whose platforms and algorithms have considerable influence on the dissemination of information through society (Viner 2016). Regardless of what information might be available in the online environment, the 'filter bubble' presents us with a narrowed and biased worldview, potentially reinforcing individuals' existing understandings and giving the false impression that these represent dominant public opinion (the 'echo chamber' effect). Gulfs in understanding between different groups in society may open up as Internet users are increasingly isolated from experi-

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ence and opinion that do not conform to their own. In the age of the 'personalised web', what measures might help to inform and empower citizens accessing and interpreting information online, and to promote shared societal understanding and conversations?

The informational environment in which Internet users operate is further muddied by the proliferation of unreliable sources of evidence. As it has become possible for anyone with Internet access to communicate information to a global audience, and as traditional print media struggle to remain competitive in the online news ecosystem, the information made available to us is no longer subject to the same processes or standards of curation (Stewart et al. 2016). The algorithmic organisation of online content, together with the online advertising model that incentivises 'click-bait' headlines, facilitates the rapid spread of rumour or 'fake news' (Viner 2016). As un-evidenced claims proliferate, as 'click-bait' stories inflame public discourse, and as 'echo chambers' entrench and aggravate differences in opinion, digital technologies may serve to misinform and polarise public opinion, rather than to educate, connect and foster critical engagement with political issues.

While independent fact-checking sites, such as Full Fact in the UK, as well as fact-checking services supported by traditional news organisations, such as Le Monde's 'Décodeurs' in France,[9]

have to some extent taken up the mantle of quality control, the sheer volume and pace of the information published online means that it will be impossibly difficult for fact-checkers to keep up, even if it were always feasible to distinguish truths from false information. Social media companies have been called upon to take greater responsibility for the use of their platforms to spread fake news and violent extremist propaganda, but their efforts to respond to the challenge – for example, through a new information-sharing initiative aimed at more efficiently removing terrorist propaganda – have sparked concerns around the potential censorship of real news stories and free speech.[10] Interventions to tackle the spread of misinformation may also prove to be ineffective or even counterproductive. Facebook's initiative to label unreliable news stories as 'disputed' even seems, in one instance, to have driven a backlash of shares in response to the perceived censorship of legitimate information (Levin 2017). Faced with the scale of the challenge, European governments are considering controversial measures to regulate the information published and shared on social media platforms.[11] It remains to be seen what effects these interventions may have.

State–public online communications and relationships: The use of digital technologies by political parties and institutions

Since the 2010 general election, the use of digital technologies for online campaigning by politicians and their political parties has become a standard campaign tool to help forge new relationships with the electorate and reach wider audiences. As well as official party accounts, many politicians use personal Facebook and Twitter profiles to promote their manifestos, criticise the claims and

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behaviours of their opponents, and share their experiences from the campaign trail, with sometimes unintended (often humorous or derisory) effects. However, analysis of the use of social media by politicians during the 2015 general election raised concerns that politicians are failing to capitalise on the potential of social media technologies to foster a more organic, two-way dialogue with the electorate and build public trust in the political system.[12]

Somewhat paradoxically, however, dissemination via social media means that political messages no longer have to be broadcast to the public at large; innovations in data science and digital marketing strategies have allowed politicians to 'micro-target' particular demographics with carefully tailored messages. The use of voters' personal data to leverage political influence has raised serious concerns about the impact that these technologies may be having on the democratic process. Earlier this year, the Information Commissioner's Office announced the launch of an enquiry following controversy around the involvement of behavioural profiling companies in recent political campaigns, such as Donald Trump's presidential campaign and the Leave.EU campaign (Doward et al. 2017). (See also Box 3. below for a civil society response to the use of micro-targeting by political parties).

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Box 3. Who Targets Me

In the run-up to the June 8 general election, and in light of expectations that the micro-targeting of social media users would form a core part of the main political parties' campaign strategies (Booth 2017), a nationwide project called Who Targets Me was launched to 'throw some light on dark ads' by showing social media users how online political campaigns are targeting and trying to influence their vote based on their demographic data. The project asked social media users to volunteer their social media data in order to contribute to public understanding of how this data may be used by political campaigns. This understanding is also fed back to data donors at an individual level.[13]

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Political institutions have also started to use digital technologies to promote democratic processes. Government departments and agencies regularly use social media platforms to engage citizens in their work. The UK Parliament has issued 471 responses to petitions submitted through the government's online petition platform and has debated 56 in the House of Commons.[14] Elsewhere in the world, national and local governments are experimenting with a range of digital tools to strengthen democratic processes, involving citizens in, for example, the allocation of local budgets, the drafting and review of legislation, crowdsourcing policy ideas, and consensus building around particular issues (Simon et al. 2017). However, careful consideration needs to be given to their appropriate use, in order to avoid further disillusionment with the political process, or unsatisfactory outcomes, such as further polarisation of opinion or policy outcomes based on misinformation or poor democratic representation.[15] Digital platforms may also be used to enhance more traditional electoral processes: Internet voting could hold significant potential for facilitating more inclusive electoral participation, with particular benefits for the elderly, travellers, those with prohibitive

working hours, those living abroad and people with disabilities. Cybersecurity concerns are, however, acute, and they in part explain why poll-site-based voting solutions currently remain the norm: although France allowed French citizens abroad to vote electronically in previous legislative elections, the perceived level of cyber risk led the French government to abandon plans for electronic voting in the 2017 legislative elections (LePennetier et al. 2017).

Ambiguous and unequal effects: Will digital technologies promote or limit democratic inclusivity and representation?

While digital penetration and skills have increased, the potential for digital technologies to contribute to strengthened democratic processes is currently undermined by significant discrepancies in the use of the Internet across different groups in society. These differences can be a result of varying access to technology and infrastructure (whether for geographic or economic reasons); varying skills and abilities; and social and cultural factors. Groups that are particularly unrepresented in the digital sphere are older generations and those with disabilities, and digital skills also differ according to income level and region (Stewart et al. 2016). The ways in which different groups use digital technologies also varies significantly, with many more young people accessing social media sites and online news compared to those aged over 65 years old (Stewart et al. 2016).[16] Differences in the use of digital technologies by different demographic groups, as well as the shift toward single issue campaigning that online activism has facilitated, mean that policymakers should be wary of considering the loudest voices online to be representative of public opinion.[17]

Moreover, it is also not clear that digital technologies are mobilising engagement among members of society who are otherwise politically disengaged.[18] Any strengthening of political engagement that digital platforms facilitate may be limited to those who are already engaged, and therefore may not reach those groups in society where the impact would be greatest. Furthermore, the 'real world' impact of digital activism has been questioned. The low effort required to sign an e-petition or share an article or video through social media channels have led some to dismiss these forms of online activism as 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' – a superficial or lazy engagement with political issues that may offer Internet users the 'feel good' illusion of having done something meaningful, as well as the opportunity to signal their virtue to online peers, but which does not necessarily translate into political efficacy or contribute to lasting social change.[19] In Europe, the gap between online activism and offline engagement has been described as a 'European democracy paradox': expanded opportunities to participate in the political process, including through digital platforms, have not always been accompanied by increased participation in formal democratic processes in recent years, especially among younger generations (Marlon 2014).[20]

While it is broadly accepted that digital technologies offer new and enhanced opportunities for individual learning, state–public communication, and strengthened civil society, the extent to which this potential is being realised is therefore less certain. The rapid pace of change has thrown up complex challenges that we are struggling to understand, let alone develop solutions for. What strategies or tools might help us more expertly navigate our online environment, more effectively and inclusively participate in political life, and ensure that any momentum in support of posi-

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tive social change that digital platforms foster is translated into strengthened democratic processes offline? Finally, what will be the respective roles and remits of different actors – civil society, industry, government and academia – whose cooperation and coordination will no doubt be vital for the development of effective and sustainable solutions?

Endnotes

[1] Research shows that people tend to want to have a greater voice in some policy areas – for example, in health and welfare – compared to others, such as climate change. People are also slightly more likely to want to be involved in local decisionmaking compared with national decisionmaking, and they are more likely to feel that they do have influence over local decisionmaking. See Ipsos MORI (2010).

[2] See FixMyStreet (2017) homepage.

[3] See Stewart et al. (2016).

[4] See 38Degrees (2017) homepage.

[5] See Change.org (2017) homepage.

[6] See Avaaz (2016) homepage.

[7] See UK Government and Parliament Petitions (2017).

[8] See, for example, von Behr et al. (2013). See also research by Peter Neumann, overviewed in his public lecture titled 'Online Radicalisation: Myths and Reality' (2017).

[9] See Les Decodeurs (2017) homepage.

[10] See, for example, Solon (2016), Los Angeles Times editorial board (2016) and Jeong (2016).

[11] See, for example, legislative measures under consideration in Germany that would require social media companies to censor the publication of fake news or hate crime on their platforms (Rettman & Eriksson 2017). It has also been reported that UK Prime Minister Theresa May and French President Emmanuel Macron plan to introduce legislation that would penalise tech companies, for example through fines, if they fail to remove inflammatory content (Elgot 2017).

[12] See Fletcher (2015) and Bright (2015).

[13] See Who Targets Me? (2017).

[14] See UK Government and Parliament Petitions (2017).

[15] See, for example, commentaries by Simon et al. (2017), Mulgan (2015) and Bass (2016).

[16] See also Ofcom (2016) for more detail on the use of digital media across demographic groups.

[17] It is notable, for example, that while different age groups access and use digital technologies in different ways, age is also thought to be a strong indicator of likely voting preferences and electoral participation. See for example, YouGov's initial analysis of voting behaviour in the 2017 UK general election (Curtis, 2017), also discussed alongside other sources by the BBC's reality check team (ELECTION 2017 reality check, 2017).

[18] See, for example, a discussion of mobilisation vs reinforcement views by Koc-Michalska et al. (2016).

[19] See, for example, Stewart et al. (2016).

[20] See also Hoorens et al. (2013).

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About the Digital Society Thought Leadership Programme 2017

This Perspective explores the potential impacts that digital technologies may have on the nature of civic engagement and political processes, providing an overview of the ways in which digital platforms and tools may contribute to strengthening a more inclusive civil society, and highlighting the significant risks posed by the use of these technologies. The authors argue that these risks must be properly understood and addressed if democratic society is to benefit from continuing innovation in this space. This Perspective is part of a series of four exploring the opportunities and challenges that digital technologies are creating within society ahead of the 2017 Thought Leadership programme at St George's House, Windsor which has been designed and will be delivered by RAND Europe in conjunction with the Corsham Institute.

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