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Opinion regulation or civic dialogue? Seeking new theoretical frameworks for the study of digital politics

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Abstract: This article centers on the theoretical articulation of scientific studies examining interactions between different civic, political and economic actors implicated in discussions or informal exchanges among citizens on political parties' social network sites (SNS). To come to a broader understanding of this phenomenon in western democracies, this text intends to contribute to the development of new, more nuanced, interdisciplinary, and generalizable analytical frameworks.

Keywords: SNS, political parties, democracy, concept of address

Entre régulation de l'opinion et dialogue avec les citoyens : à la recherche de nouveaux cadres analytiques pour étudier la communication politique en ligne

Résumé: Cet article s'intéresse à l'articulation théorique d'études scientifiques qui portent sur les interactions entre acteurs sociaux, politiques et économiques impliqués dans des discussions ou échanges sur les pages et comptes de réseaux sociomériques (RSN) offerts par des partis politiques. Pour mieux saisir ce phénomène au sein des démocraties occidentales, ce texte vise à contribuer au développement de nouveaux cadres analytiques plus nuancés, interdisciplinaires et généralisables.

Mots-clés: RSN, partis politiques, démocratie, concept d'adresse

Introduction

Political actors have integrated Facebook, Twitter, and other social network sites (SNS) as communication channels to distribute information, mobilize votes, and raise funds. However, not only do institutional actors use SNS for political purposes; citizens do as well. In fact, scholars at the Pew Research Center show that one third of 18 to 19-year-old Americans name social media as the most helpful type of in-

formation source for learning about the 2016 presidential elections (Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer & Mitchell, 2016).

Much research has been done on citizen participation using information and communication technologies (ICT) employed by political institutions. Interestingly, there are differences in the way scholars interpret their findings. While some academics talk about civic dialogues and democratic accountability (e.g. Dutton & Dubois, 2015), others insist on public opinion regulation or surveillance (e.g. Stoycheff, 2016). This may be linked to the variety of theoretical approaches mobilized. Indeed, some researchers embed their studies in a broader discussion on the health of representative democracy or civic empowerment (e.g. Marland, Giasson & Small, 2014). Others put forward neoliberal theories and the commodification of public speech (e.g. Fuchs, 2013). Still others discuss online political participation from a media viewpoint, focusing on new information practices (e.g. Jouët & Rieffel, 2013).¹ As Coleman and Freelon (2015, p. 3) put it: “As with most historical developments, the significance of these relatively recent innovations in political communication depends on where one happens to be standing and how one is looking.”

To understand better this phenomenon, many scholars have pointed out the need for more nuanced (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016), interdisciplinary (Granjon, 2014) and multidimensional (Van Dijck, 2013) approaches to develop generalizable analytical frameworks (Voirol, 2014). The present article intends to contribute to the development of such innovative frameworks. First, we will insist on the importance of considering contextual aspects when studying online political exchanges. Based on a literature review, we will then discuss the limits of this scholarship using examples from Canadian political parties’ activities on Facebook. Finally, we will suggest how these limits can be overcome. In this context, Voirol’s (2014) “concept of address” (*concept d’adresse*) and its contributions to finding new analytical frameworks will be introduced.

1. Problematization: the importance of contextual aspects

While it is true that using SNS for political purposes is far from being the most popular online activity in Canada (Small, Jansen, Bastien, Giasson & Koop, 2015), current normalization theory that assumes that only politically interested Internet users stumble upon political content is outdated (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016). Depoliticized citizens might react to a friend liking, commenting or sharing contents provided by political parties. Contrary to what one might expect, Vaccari and Valeriani (2016, p. 295) show that “informal political discussion [on political parties’ SNS] *deepens* party related engagement by offering new avenues by which party members can provide parties with support, feedback, and resources, and it *broadens* party-related engagement by enabling those who are not party members to get involved”.

¹ For a more detailed discussion on the variety of theoretical approaches : Hübner (2016).

Several scholars have argued that users with a highly politicized network are more likely to be exposed to this kind of content. In actuality, Messing (2013, p. 21) states that our Facebook newsfeeds only show 25% of our “friend’s” activities. Facebook’s algorithms classify posts according to previous uses (likes, clicks, comments, etc.). Reality, it seems, is more complicated. Indeed, this is not the only way to stumble upon political party’s publications. Parties also invest in promoted posts, sponsored stories and page-post, like or marketplace ads. Users can thus be targeted depending on the likelihood of their interest in a political actor or a particular topic. The capital role of algorithms in the organization of personal newsfeeds was often highlighted (e.g. Van Dijck, 2013). A few months after the Guardian published leaked internal guidelines showing that Facebook’s news selection is actually in the hand of editors, not algorithms; Facebook eliminated its editing team and faced a fake news scandal shortly after doing so (Thielman, 2016).

As we have seen, there are different ways in which users can come into contact with content provided by political parties on SNS. This said, we do not want to argue for a certain politicization potential. Academics have shown that being exposed to political content does not always lead to a higher level of engagement (Mabi & Théviot, 2014). Rather, we want to show that the different contexts in which users interact with this type of content should also be considered when studying online exchanges. While the modes of online discussion have been widely studied, the context in which these developments take place is rarely considered in a holistic way. As a matter of fact, the users’ engagement with political party’s posts differs when users 1) follow the party’s account or page, 2) when they react to a friend’s post sharing the political party’s content or 3) when users engage in an exchange linked to a promoted post.

2. Literature review: pushing the limits of existing frameworks

Using examples of Canadian political parties’ activities on Facebook, we will now review the existing literature. Our goal is twofold: we want to highlight the limits of current analytical frameworks and identify some of the reasons explaining the diversity of interpretations regarding online participation. As we will see below, this diversity is closely linked to the absence or restraint consideration of contextual aspects.

2.1. “I like!”

When visiting the Liberal Party of Canada’s Facebook page, one can easily see who and how many of one’s friends like the page. It is indicated in the upper left corner along with the total number of likes. Many researchers interested in discussions and informal exchanges on such pages have studied this particular group of users, exploring their uses such as argumentation techniques, socio-demographic backgrounds or political preferences. These studies are often in line with those focusing on discussion forums located on the party’s websites. Embedded in a debate

about the health of representative democracy, the latter analyze attempts to regenerate political parties as a place for civic participation (Gibson and Ward, 2011). This research suggests that participants are in general party supporters or, on the contrary, supporters of the opposition trying to harm consensual communication processes (Blanchard, 2011). Scholars agree on the fact that interaction between parties and citizens is relatively rare and that it is influenced by the design and the strategic configuration of the platforms as well as by the work of community managers (Mabi & Théviot, 2014). Authors also assume that parties use SNS combining top-down with extremely controlled participatory bottom-up approaches (Vaccari, 2010). Vaccari (2010) suggests that data mining techniques allow parties to control more or less the outcome of such participatory projects, for example by adapting a message to the interests of a targeted user group.

2.2. “They like!”

While the existing literature explains the broader social context of users who like particular pages, these texts find their limit when scholars look at informal interactions such as the one demonstrated below. Here, User A shared the Liberal Party’s content, tagged a friend and thus gave User B (and the rest of his network) the possibility to react. Studies focusing on the relation between supporters and political parties tend to leave aside the intersubjective and interactional aspects of exchanges between citizens. If we look at this example, however, those aspects guide the conversation. User A seems to have mixed up his interlocutor. Hence, there is no discussion about politics that emerges. Scholars like Eliasoph (2003) have highlighted the importance of sociability in the context of public participation. Different issues related to inter-comprehension, recognition of others or self-expression can lead to or hold back specific actions (Elisasoph, 2003). Voirol (2014) links this impasse in recent interpretations to the separation of two fields of research. The first area is interested in the social structure and the power relations between representatives and the represented. The second one analyzes interaction, situated activity and individual appropriation processes of ICT’s.

Table 1. *Reproduction of an informal exchange linked to a user’s post sharing a live video of the Liberal Party of Canada²*

[User A] shared <i>Liberal Party of Canada Parti libéral du Canada’s</i> live video	
[Tag User B]	
[Video]	
Comment User B	What’s up? Canada is cool, but why am I tagged here?

² To assure the anonymity of the participants, we cannot publish a screenshot indicating date, time and content of the Liberal Party’s post.

Comment User A	I'll stop sending you Canadian stuff
Comment User A	Maybe it wasn't you
Comment User B	What wasn't me? I am so confused ☺
Comment User B	Also that video is 49 minutes, yo.

Yet, both are interrelated. On the one hand, the exchange above raises questions about situational and intersubjective aspects. User B does not understand why User A thinks this content would be of interest to him. This misunderstanding plays a role in the development of this conversation and their future interactions. User A will stop sending B “Canadian stuff” since he does not seem to appreciate it. We can only speculate why. Majdouli and Zetlaoui (2016) explain that users try to control the content on their profiles, not wanting to be associated with certain contents. They go back in time to reevaluate their choices and delete previous posts or block users who publish too much about a specific topic.

On the other hand, the political domain is also sensitive to self-censorship motivated by safety or legal reasons. The latter are issues more likely to be discussed in studies on social structures and power relations. Naab (2012, p. 51) points out that users could “fear personal safety, experience economic pressure or lack knowledge on legal protection”. Stoycheff (2016) shows that the US scandals related to government and commercial surveillance raised awareness about the consequences of exposing private information online. Hence, User B’s reaction could also be linked to a fear of political or commercial profiling. In practice, it is more likely to be a mix of both.

2.3. “Facebook likes!”

The first two sets of texts neglect the economic aspects of online participation on SNS. Suffice it to say that the most popular platforms used in the political sphere – Facebook and Twitter – belong to private corporations. While the separation of the sociopolitical and the socioeconomical domain might be helpful in thinking about the specifics of each domain, it does not allow us to understand the way they are intertwined when exploring empirical reality (Dacheux & Goujon, 2015). It is all the more surprising that most of the research in political communication and political science ignores the role of these private corporations, particularly when talking about the contemporary crisis of western society. As Dacheux and Goujon (2015) put it well, this crisis is not only a political one (a search for new modalities of state intervention), but also a financial and industrial one (a search for new models to save or to surpass capitalism) as well as being a symbolic crisis (a search for new models for a more sustainable and equal society).

Companies such as Facebook are monetizing the circulation of content, including political content (Fuchs, 2013). To promote posts and target specific users or user groups (according to their language, workplace or circumscription), parties invest

money. User generated content creates surplus value by generating metadata that can be sold to third parties, not only to private firms but also to political institutions (Fuchs, 2013). For Fuchs (2013, p. 33) users are, therefore, objects of commodification and “through this commodification their consciousness becomes permanently exposed to commodity logic in the form of advertisement”. Of course, the mobilization of such strategies depends on the party system in a given country, the party’s culture, and the allocated budget. The know-how to exploit this data is monopolized by a minority of economic actors.

However this does not mean that users are slaves to the technique or to major political and economic actors (Hübner, 2016). Critical approaches in the political economy of communications scholarship do not always consider the user’s perspective. Firstly, users can anticipate and challenge some of the effects of commodification by configuring their newsfeed in a certain way (Majdouli and Zetlaoui, 2016). Secondly, as mentioned above, being exposed to political content does not guarantee the user’s engagement with it. Thirdly, citizens do not feel like being objects of commodification. They evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of exposing private information in public. By doing so, they give up certain aspects of their private life because it seems advantageous.

3. Seeking new frameworks: the contributions of Voirol’s concept of address³

Based on the above discussion, it is difficult to precisely define online political participation. According to Baluta (2013, p. 242), due to the variety and diversity of theoretical approaches, concepts like citizenship and participation lack “a clear understanding since [they obtain] meanings in different historical contexts”. Moreover, while the high proportion of micro case studies conducted on this subject does not allow researchers to draw generalizable conclusions, the normative and philosophical work interested in macrosociological aspects of political SNS use have largely neglected empirical findings (Granjon, 2014). In our opinion, we have to combine both approaches to acknowledge the possibilities and the constraints of digital politics. Therefore, we need new analytical frameworks that allow a more nuanced interpretation of online participation and take into account the variety of actors implicated in online exchanges on political institutions’ SNS (Lemieux, 2014).

A concept that can help us develop such frameworks is Voirol’s (2014) “concept of address” (*concept d’adresse*). According to Voirol (2014), recent studies focusing on user activity overshadow situations where individuals feel incapable of acting. It is for this reason that he pleads for reinscribing the study of activity into its broader social context. In other words, this author insists on the importance of striking a balance between the analysis of situational activity, of “what is”, and its relation to economic and political institutions. In his view, it is important to reinscribe the ac-

³ The epistemological project introduced in this section is also discussed in the following conference proceedings : Hübner (2016).

tivity observed in its social, intellectual and ideological context. This reinscription allows him to reevaluate the role of institutions. He defines the latter as “être sans corps”, being without a body, addressing subjects or groups by offering them support for their activities or by preventing them from acting. Institutions, therefore, can propose action plans to individuals or groups while pushing them to act in a certain way. In this way, Voirol can analyze the dialogue between citizen’s activities and institutional strategies and actions.

This concept allows for a more nuanced point of view for two reasons. First of all, it is possible to overcome an interpretation that looks for the issues of domination only on the level of the political actors (party, politicians, leaders). Voirol’s moving conception of the term “institution” invites us to examine the modalities of its deployment. These modalities are closely linked to the multiplications of actors implicated in the communicational and political processes. One can then analyze not only the role of the political party but also the role of the communications department, the technological device and the economic actors implicated in these procedures. Secondly, the “concept of address” prevents scholars from over evaluating the power of user appropriation without neglecting the possibility of hijacking the device. For this author, the conception of “institution” is also a driving one. The “institution”, for Voirol, is a configuring, but also reacting “being”, which adjusts and transforms itself in a dynamic process of action. In this way, his model allows us to study the mutual dynamics between citizens’ (individual or group) activities and the mobilization and communication strategies of political institutions. In other terms, each side is shaping the other in complex ways. Hence, it is possible to challenge the tensions between what is, what might be possible and what constraints citizens from acting politically – online as well as offline. In our opinion, it is only by acknowledging these tensions that we can overcome the contradictory findings.

Conclusion

In our view, taking Voirol’s concept as an epistemological starting point allows researchers to combine an empirical study – based on theories of activity, interaction, and SNS use – and a broader analysis of social structures by replacing the findings in their larger social context (Lemieux, 2014). This concept provides an epistemological basis that helps answer our initial question: do digital politics lead to civic dialogues or opinion regulation? Instead of choosing one side, we have to produce a more nuanced point of view on online political participation. This involves a larger discussion about democracy and its relation to the economic sphere. Granjon (2014, p. 120) argues that such frameworks help explore “the ways in which ICTs tend to participate in the maintenance or displacement of social behaviors whether it is in the sense of accomplishment or limitation of the individuals using those devices.”

In conclusion, we wish to remind our readers that the epistemological considerations presented above need to be completed with other theoretical elements to operationalize both the citizens’ activities and the institution’s strategies.

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