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Social media

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Abstract: Social media are services and technologies centred on user and user-generated content facilitating three types of Internet activities: content sharing, networking among users and consumption of user-generated content. Their diffusion has been sustained by the introduction of Web 2.0 technologies and by the massification of Internet-connected mobile devices. Access to social media is offered by Internet platforms that maintain centralised control of processes and all the data they generate. Social media have been used for political communication and organising since the 1990s. Research of online deliberation and Internet-mediated organisation found that along with facilitating access to participation, social media also maintain critical limits as democratising tools. Social media can exacerbate the fragmentation of the debate and existing inequalities. Internet-mediated organisations tend to be less durable and less politically effective. Also, social media tend to increase the level of political "turbulence" in democratic systems while providing non-democratic government with effective tools for repressions.

Keywords: User-generated content; Web 2.0; Online deliberation; Internet platforms; Political participation; Political communication.

Social media identify Internet-based technologies and services that allow people to communicate synchronously or asynchronously with one or more people through text, images and sound that they generate as digital content. The generation of content by users commonly involves the appropriation, manipulation and reappropriation of content created by others which is either integrally embedded in newly generated content or instead referenced through an Internet address. If social media are about users and the distribution of user-generated content, the continuous evolution of social media technologies and the emergence of new services prevent the formulation of a strict and lasting definition of social media. Still, we can identify three types of Internet activities that social media technologies facilitate. We consequentially define as social media the Internet services that offer one or a combination of these types of technologies. First, social media facilitate sharing the content generated by a single user either with another user (one-to-one) or with more than one user (one-to-many). We can expect social media content to be authored by single users only as social media usually do not facilitate sharing content authored collectively by multiple users (many-to-many). Second, social media facilitate networking by creating lasting connections among users (one-to-one) or between users and groups of users (one-to-many). Third, social media facilitate navigating, consuming and engaging with user-generated content.

The diffusion of social media has been traced to the diffusion of personal computing devices and their integration into the Internet. Technologies such as electronic mailing lists, newsgroups and bulletin board systems that facilitated the creation and distribution of user-generated content became widely accessible since the early 1980s when they were bundled with other services such as airline reservations or online newspapers by Internet

service providers (Campbell-Kelly et al., 2014, p. 272). Yet the massification of social media took place only in the 2000s following the diffusion of two critical technologies: Web 2.0 applications and mobile Internet-connected devices. Web 2.0 identifies technologies (and the websites offering them) that allow for the "efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing/refining of informational content" (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008: 233). Among the most popular Web 2.0 applications were blogs and social *networking* sites such as Friendster and MySpaces that went online in the early 2000s offering a dedicated Internet service that allowed to generate and curate content associated with a personal profile and to connect through that profile with other users (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The *social* attribute was immediately an essential characteristic of Web 2.0: indeed, the terms "Web 2.0" and "social media" were often used interchangeably.

The iPhone, introduced in 2007, was determinant in creating a mass market for user-friendly Internet-connected mobile devices and helped to sustain a "Mobile Revolution" (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Along with an always-on Internet connection, smartphones - by far the most common type of Internet-connected mobile devices (see Figure 1) - are deeply personal devices packing an unprecedented array of technologies to generate, edit, consume, and share content. The rapid increase in the number of social media users and Internet-connected mobile device users, fed each other and, in the words of Castells (2008: 448), created worldwide a context in which "[w]e never quit the networks, and the networks never quit us".

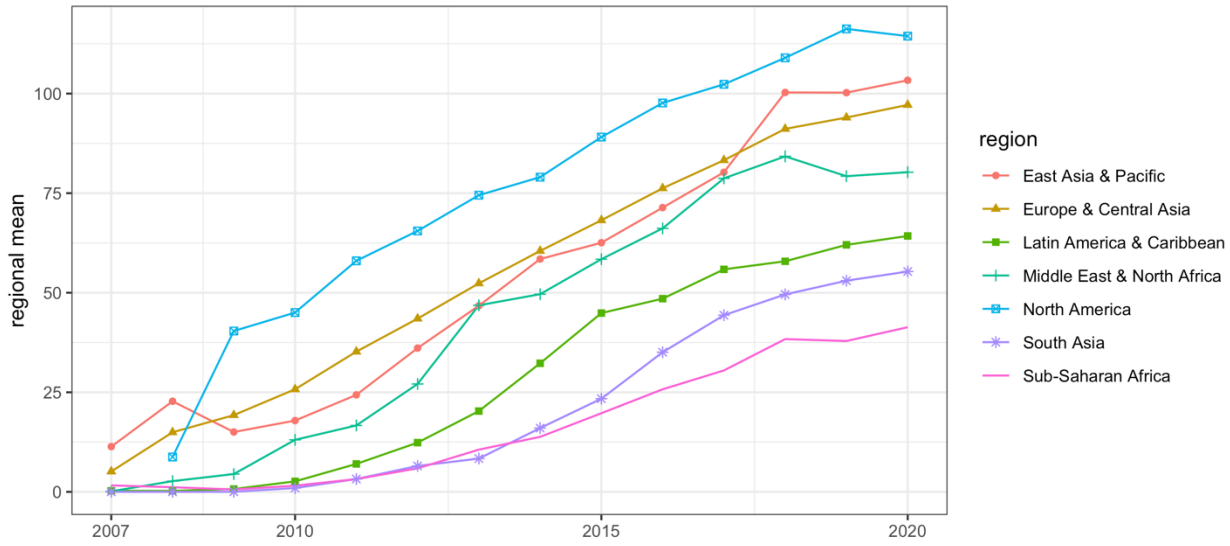

Figure 1: Active mobile-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants (Source: ITU)

As Web 2.0 and mobile technologies made the Internet and social media a core component of the human communicative experience, they also contributed to their vertical integration into siloed *platforms* run by for-profit organisations controlling access to the service and its technologies and owning the data generated by users. Social media platforms are "environments" where users carry on their activities. According to Dijck (2013), platforms do not simply "channel" these activities but instead "program" them in line with the organisations' interests and goals. Dijck (2013) also observes that social media companies

tend to "lock in" users to maximise the engagement on their platform and "fence off" their activities, for example preventing or limiting interoperability, to avoid losing them to competing services.

According to Bratton (2016), the success of platforms is made possible by their capacity to widely distribute access through user interfaces accessed by millions (and sometimes billions) while centralising control on functional design, processes, and - critically - data. Complete and exclusive control of users' behavioural data is among the most valuable assets of social media platforms. In the *Age of Surveillance Capitalism,* Zuboff (2018) makes the argument that the user-generated data is employed to improve engagement through customisation and personalisation but that critically a "behavioural surplus" is also extracted to generate predictions about users' "future behaviours". These predictions are eventually sold to the best bidder and represent social media platforms' main source of revenue.

The public attention dedicated to the ethical issues generated by accumulating, using and profiting from user-generated data significantly increased following the revelations in 2018 about the operations of Cambridge Analytica and its access to the social media records of - reportedly - 87 million Facebook users. Two categories of issues have emerged from the debate: first, the ownership of personal data produced by users within privately owned platforms, and second, the analytical capacity to use detailed personal information to predict and manipulate user behaviour at scale. If the data scandal triggered regulators' response, for example, with the implementation of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) a few months after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, it also urged self-regulating interventions by platforms.

Social media was used in political struggle as early as 1994 when communiques from Chiapas' Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) were distributed and popularised worldwide from Mexico through bulletin boards (Robberson, 1995). However, in this early case, social media was not yet used to mobilise the protest locally but instead to reach a global audience. A few years later, Web 2.0 technologies were notably applied by media activists to create the site Indymedia.org in support of the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. Researching this case, Pickard (2006) notes how "[t]he internet amplifies Indymedia activists' potential for radical democracy by democratizing media production, increasing non-hierarchical communications, and redistributing power to facilitate coordinated, co-operative action"; social media technologies create a new institutional structure for political action to the point where "technology and institutional structure [become] mutually constitutive" (p. 36).

Observing the participatory character of these technologies and their affordance for "organising without organisations" (Shirky, 2008), Web 2.0 technologies were celebrated as potential democratising tools to revitalise democracy in Western societies while supporting its emergence in the rest of the world. In this sense, social media could greatly facilitate both the emergence of deliberative spaces and coordinating for collective action.

The research on online deliberation was often framed against the Habermasian concept of "public sphere" - with social media services offering publics and counterpublics ease of

access to political discussion. Along with framing it, academic research helped identify the critical limits of social media as a deliberation tool. Dahlberg (2001) and Papacharissi (2002) note that social media have the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities along with debate fragmentation and be captured by commercial interests.

In theorising the impact of social media on political action, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) develop the influential idea of "connective action". Social media enable to coordinate effectively with "loose organizational coordination" and indeed promote "personal expression" and "personal action frames" over the emergence of a collective sense of belonging to a strong organisation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Concerning the limits of social media for political action, Tufecki (2017) notes that the absence of any lasting or meaningful democratising effect of the anti-government uprisings of the Arab Spring, notwithstanding mass participation in the protest events, was at least partially explained by insufficient collective capacity developed by networked movements. Social media can jump-start large protest events but "[b]esides taking care of tasks, the drudgery of traditional organizing helps create collective decision-making capabilities […] and builds a collective capacities" (Tufecki, 2017, p. xxiii). But social media can limit political action also because they provide anti-democratic institutions with the technology to monitor, censor and repress. After analysing the text of millions of Chinese social media posts before and after the Chinese government's censorship, King et al. (2013) found that most posts containing references to a collective action event were quickly removed. In a broad study surveying the effect of social media in autocratic countries, Weidmann and Rød (2019) find that Internet technologies offer governments repressive capabilities that, on average, offset the protesting capabilities that they offered to the opposition.

In democratic polities, the research identified systemic effects on politics from the widespread use of social media among voters and their political leadership. Margetts et al. (2015) observe a significant increase in "political turbulence" and "chaotic pluralism" in which atomic interests can instantaneously mobilise without support from any organised group. Gerbaudo (2019) theoretically associates social media with the destructuration of hierarchical political organisations and the emergence of forms of "hyperleadership" in which highly charismatic politicians replace traditional vertical power structures by cultivating a direct connection with the electorate through social media.

While transforming personal and public communication along with the diffusion of information, social media has had a significant impact on politics. If social media facilitate access to political content, it also facilitate the production and distribution of political content through Internet-mediated social networks and social media platforms. Speed and reach of these diffusion networks dramatically alter the pace of political events although without necessarily improving the lasting political efficacy of Internet-mediated actions. Social media platforms - architects, maintainers, and owners of the technological infrastructure of these deliberative and diffusion networks – have emerged as new political actors playing a critical role both as providers of social media services and controller of the diffusion of user-generated content.

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