

Chapter 3

Digital Media, Civic Literacy, and Civic Engagement: The “Promise and Peril” of Internet Politics in Canada

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ABSTRACT

It has been asserted that digital media can improve literacy, engagement, and activism so long as it is promoted and judiciously encouraged by state, political, and societal actors committed to expanding the scope of policy-making to those that otherwise feel ‘left-out’. More specifically, it has been averred that social media, ‘clicktivism,’ and electronic referendums have the potential to educate and energize voters on the day-to-day challenges that confront government, and give them a direct say into how certain issues ought to be addressed. However, this chapter argues that while there are still good reasons to be optimistic, looking forward, we also need to critically appraise the false promise(s) of digital media, and do so in a more nuanced fashion. It will be suggested that Canada’s comparably low civic literacy rates provide us with some insight into the underlying perils of plebiscitarianism should a more sincere form digital empowerment prevail. It will also be argued that political institutions, culture, Internet usage, populism should also be accounted for.

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INTRODUCTION

It has been almost 15 years since Henry Milner (2002) published his wonderfully crafted book on the indispensable link between civic literacy and political participation. In it, he argued that well-informed citizens are perhaps the most critical component to genuine political discourse and engagement. Indeed, voters that possess high levels of moral and instrumental competence can reasonably contribute to governmental decision-making and hold their legislative representatives to account. Conversely, those lacking in adequate knowledge of local, provincial, and/or federal affairs typically become complacent and unwilling to appraise the performance of those elected to preserve and uphold broadly shared community (and/or national) values and visions. They become little more than subjects to be managed and ruled over, and their silence or disinterest tends to reinforce a form of creeping elitism that is patently out of step with meaningful participatory politics. ‘Democracy,’ in all of its uses, devolves into a kitschy slogan rather than a system of government and governance designed to empower the myriad stake-holders that compete for power in liberally oriented societies.

It has, however, been asserted that digital media can improve literacy, engagement, and activism so long as it is promoted and judiciously encouraged by state, political, and societal actors committed to expanding the scope of policy-making to those that otherwise feel ‘left-out’ (Peters and Abud, 2009; Perimutter, 2008; Kim, 2008; Behrouzi 2006a). More specifically, it has been averred that social media, ‘clicktivism,’ and electronic referendums—to name a few of the possibilities—have the potential to educate and energize voters on the day-to-day challenges that confront government, and importantly, give them a direct say into how certain issues ought to be addressed (Kempo, 2013). Furthermore, we are told that e-governance and e-voting are the future and that governments will have no choice but to submit to the demands of ‘emerging digital citizens’ (Tapscott, Williams, & Herman, 2008)! In all, information and communications technologies (ICTs)—that is, the Internet and Web-based services—are liberating, and embody a logical, necessary, and irresistible revolution in democratic politics. They innervate, cultivate new and promising forms of expressiveness, and in significant ways, make it easier for people to get involved in the fine art of politicking at multiple levels.

Yet, much of this positive zeitgeist seems to be taken as an article of faith. There is an obvious disconnect between how ICTs are being used to improve government services and efficiency and how they are being used to improve the overall quality of democratic intercourse. Put differently, the Internet’s ‘potential’ and government e-services are often conflated with how Internet based applications can be deployed—and are being deployed—to enhance public trust, government transparency, and genuine political activism.

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