Empowering and Disempowering Aspects of New Media Networking and Digital Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between new media networking (NMN) and political participation continues to develop in complex ways. In light of evidence pointing to increased political participation through NMN, the structures of the networks people engage continue to exhibit both empowering and disempowering aspects. While some gaps associated with the Digital Divide are closing, others are opening. This essay utilizes network theory and power law distribution to further understand new media networks. The article concludes that there are inherent inequalities in new media networks, the inequalities can be addressed through public policy, and that they are made relevant through narratives of optimistic but realistic, progress.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, Digital Divide, Network Theory, New Media, Political Participation

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly clear that new media networking (NMN) and digital democracy platforms are helping citizens participate in democratic political systems (Castells, 2009; Castells, 2012; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000; Papacharissi, 2010). In some instances, these same platforms help non-democratic systems move toward democracy. Given this, an important question becomes one of who is participating in what forums and who is being excluded either through access or inability. As political systems continue to be reshaped across the world, the question remains as to what role new media networking plays in this process. In other words, how can we explain the structure and function of various new media networks, and what is the relationship to political participation and other forms of governmental action? Prior to responding to this question, a number of definitions will be discussed.

Political participation can be understood primarily as a two-pronged phenomenon. Political participation involves citizens interacting with government, as well as interaction with other citizens. At its base then, political participation is an interactive process influenced...
by social processes. This interactive network is increasingly accomplished through new media usage. New media usage also manifests predominantly as a network. As such, the investigation of NMN benefits from a social network analysis framework as opposed to investigations of individual motivations (Hacker & Morgan, 2011). The explanation arising from this type of social analysis focuses on interactivity (van Dijk, 2006), the strength of ties, as well as concerns of subjectivity based in interaction (Lanier, 2010).

It is clear that new media networking intersects with political participation. According to a recent Pew Foundation poll on Internet usage (Rainie, et al., 2012), 60% of all American adults use some form of social media. Furthermore, of that 60%, 66% have used social media platforms for political activity. According to this same study, that number accounts for 39% of all American adults. A more recent study reports that the 60% estimation has risen to 72% of all American on-line adults (Brenner & Smith, 2013). The more recent study does not address political engagement specifically, but with such a rapid increase in social media usage, it is likely that political participation vis a vis new media will also increase. However, as noted by Hacker and Morgan (2011), this increased usage raises new and important questions about the Digital Divide. Over a decade ago, communication scholars observed the main issue of the Digital Divide were no longer matters of computer or Internet access. Rather the Digital Divide involves matters of digital media skills, usage opportunities, and abilities to initiate and build interactivity within the context of new technologies and networks (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000; van Dijk, 2006).

In this article, we describe what is known about NMN and political participation within contexts of digital democracy, what empirical patterns have occurred over time regarding Digital Divide gaps, and what appears be emerging as a new set of gaps -- gaps in networking. We review major claims and which ones appear to have the most empirical support. We then bring in the data and theory concerning power law distributions for new media and social media usage, particularly in light of the continued faith in these technologies to enhance digital democracy and e-government. We also address why these distributions tend to show inequalities of contribution despite equalities of access.

NEW MEDIA NETWORKING, POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, AND DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

New media networking (NMN) and digital democracy platforms are helping citizens participate in democratic political systems or helping non-democratic systems move toward democracy. In regards to the former, numerous examples of political participation and organizing abound. For example, Cox (2013) writes about the myriad ways that Web 2.0 technologies have been used in environmental and political contexts. In short, Cox (2013) summarizes six functions of NMN in relation to environmental politics. These include the following: 1) disseminating environmental information and creating enthusiasm; 2) creating networked “green” communities; 3) reporting and documenting environmental concerns at both global and local levels; 4) engaging public criticism of politicians; 5) mobilizing the general public around environmental issues; and 6) creating spaces for “micro-volunteering” and self-organizing (Cox, 2013, p. 190). These functions highlight the degree to which NMN facilitates citizen participation in the democratic process.

Documenting the impact of NMN on helping non-democratic systems move toward democracy is more of a challenge. However, there are a number of anecdotes that suggest that NMN can have a powerful impact on at least the response of governmental officials to demonstrations and protests as have been seen recently throughout the Middle East. Grossman (2009), writing for Time, reported that U.S. State Department officials asked Twitter to delay an upgrade to the network platform in order to allow Iranians protesting the presidential election to continue using the service to help mobilize
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