

Chapter 80

E-Participation

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ABSTRACT

Communication has long been understood as essential to the democratic process; it not only conveys information about politics to citizens, but also enables social deliberation by allowing citizens to communicate with one another and with officials. As digital media have developed and become increasingly ubiquitous in communication, new opportunities for civic and political participation are emerging. This entry considers some of the major trends in e-participation, understood as citizens' efforts to influence their political environments through various uses of digital media. In particular, the authors explore how digital media are giving rise to new practices in: the consumption and sorting of information from the political world, the expression of political views and deliberation, the creation and sharing of novel content online, and citizen organizing within social movements.

INTRODUCTION

An informed and active citizenry is a cornerstone of democracy, and communication has long played an essential role in shaping how individuals understand and engage with their civic and political worlds. From oratory and rhetoric in the ancient Greek demos to the printing press, and from radio and television to social media, communication embodies the production and

consumption of messages that impact individuals, groups, organizations, and societies. Recent changes in communication practices and communication products, made possible by technological advancements (most notably, the Internet), raise possibilities for new modes of political action. This breadth of possibilities is reflected in emerging practices of politics, from friending candidates on Facebook to creating and sharing multimedia messages on blogs and websites to using social media for mobilization purposes during the Arab spring. Indeed, in recent years every election, and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch080

in countless events outside of elections, political actors and social movements seem armed with an array of unprecedented cyber-tools.

This chapter focuses on e-participation, a rubric that we use to characterize the civically and politically oriented practices enabled by uses of digital media. We describe the state of research on civic and political participation through digital means, while placing recent developments in the context of decades of research on the relationship between communication and political behavior.

OVERVIEW

Any consideration of political behavior, whether in cyberspace or offline, needs to take into account normative concerns about citizenship. According to political philosopher Robert Dahl (1989), the ideal democratic process not only comprises enlightened citizens who are aware of their self-interests, but also allows these individuals to engage in the decision-making process. Equally importantly, this democratic process includes all citizens. Unfortunately, decades of research have shown that societies fall short of these ideals: citizens vary in how much they know or care about social and political issues; their access to information depends in part on intellectual capital and technological access; and resources are unevenly distributed such that those in higher socioeconomic strata tend to be more participatory (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). This view of citizens is one that has pervaded the scholarship on political participation, or acts that involve citizens communicating their interests and preferences to elected leaders and other elites.

Interestingly, this view of citizens communicating vertically – that is, directly to structures of formal political power, whether through voting, contacting and official, or donating money to a candidate – neglects other domains in which individuals can engage with the world around them. Individuals can also take action toward

the good of the community to which they belong. These acts of civic participation entail horizontal communication between citizens, and like political participation, are undertaken with the public good in mind (Moy & Hussain, 2011). Citizens therefore are able to work amongst themselves and communicate with elites in attempting to effect change.

The notion that individuals are active members of a social or political system is key in the study of e-participation, a term that includes both horizontal and vertical acts of communication. With this in mind, we describe how individuals interact with digital media to activate various nodes of citizenship. We focus less on the traditional, vertical forms of communication and more on the newly manifest horizontal forms of communication; the latter, after all, bring politics closer to home and have greater potential to engage the citizenry. Our navigation of this complex domain of cyber-behavior involves various subsets of e-participation: the consumption of online media content that leads to political knowledge; the expressing of one's political perspectives through digital channels; the creation and sharing of civic content now taking place via digital media; and the use of digital media to build support for social movements and to confront official power.

Consuming Media Content

One of the most consequential ways that digital media have inserted themselves into the sphere of e-participation is to induce sea changes in the consumption of news and civic information. After all, long a hallmark of modern conceptions of citizenship, political knowledge is often a function of the consumption of mediated information (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Most simply, citizens have shifted their consumption of news in offline forms – television, newspapers, magazines – to online formats. The Pew Research Center (2011) reports that in 2010, for the first time, younger citizens received more

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