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2010

Total number of authors:
1

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Abstract

In this study, a group of Swedish social media users – politically active as well as "unpolitical" users – are interviewed in focus groups as well as individually about their attitudes towards online political participation, providing a deeper, more informed view of how social media participation works. Sweden, with its high levels of voluntary participation and with an avant-garde position in Internet, broadband and social media penetration, could indeed function as a most-likely case for studying whether social media has any positive effects on participation. The participants in the study are well-educated, young and comfortable using the Internet, further increasing the probability of finding individuals engaged in digital activism.

The results are puzzling: on the one hand, there is an almost unanimous contempt for political campaigns in social media among the participants. On the other hand, almost all of the participants are engaging with politics in social media in various ways. The article concludes in arguing that intensive methods must be used in order to gain a richer understanding of the political behaviour of citizens online.

key words: social media, political participation, social network sites, political mobilisation, Web 2.0

1. Introduction

I am a big user of Twitter and Facebook and belong to those who gladly express political statements, especially when it comes to racism and segregation issues. I cannot accept people with xenophobic views and I contribute to fighting that by spreading facts and views with links, videos and comments. – male, 36, active in an interest organisation

And it's people I know [...] that I know aren't especially interested in politics – not that I was upset or anything, but what are you going to do about it?[...] Will this affect the Sweden Democrats[1] in any way? No, it won't. It will just show up on your info wall that you have joined this group." – female, 24, not active

As social media move from being regarded as little more than a fad to becoming integrated into the everyday life of millions of people, corporations and organisations, empirical studies in the social sciences are starting to form a picture of how this widely spread form of communication might affect democracy and political participation. Generally, these studies seem to serve a more nuanced opinion on whether social media (or the Internet generally) might make democracy stronger and more equal, or if the dynamics of the digitally mediated networks of people and information are reinforcing existing elite structures in society. Social media might change the way that politics is discussed, how people are recruited into politics, and how people organise and participate in politics. As this field of study develops, it will hopefully tell us something about what we can expect from the future of representative democracy in the world, and whether we should be deeply worried, jubilant or just cautious. As the quotes above suggests, Facebook (or any other social media service) is probably not the silver bullet helping representative democracy to escape from its perceived crisis, but by studying the way individuals and groups deal with politics in this new

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[1] The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) is a right-wing populist party with strong anti-immigration views, not currently holding seats in the parliament, but generally expected to do so after the national elections in September 2010.

communicative environment, we can learn something about ourselves as political beings. Does using social media make it more probable that you will participate?

The aim of this paper is to explore views and attitudes among users regarding political information and participation in services like Facebook and Twitter in order to gain a deepened understanding of how participation comes about (or not) in this arena. The aim is not to refute or confirm any hypotheses, but rather to provide rich information aiding further inquiry. It is based on an ongoing study of Swedish social media users using virtual and physical focus group interviews conducted from November 2009 and onwards.

Sweden might be seen as an avant-garde nation concerning trends such as individualisation, globalisation, post-industrialism and information-driven economy, making it a theoretically interesting case for studying new forms of political participation (Bjereld & Demker 2006). In addition, Sweden is a country with a traditionally high level of political participation and voluntarism, as well as a high Internet and social media penetration rate: 78 % of the population have access to a broadband connection and 72 % of 18-25 year olds and 50 % of 26-35 year olds belong to an online community, with Facebook being the most popular social networking service with about 3 million members[2] (Verba et al 1995: 80; Svedberg et al 2010; Findahl 2010; Facebook.com).

As is the case in other countries, political mobilisation in social media has attracted a lot of media and public attention in the past few years, with reports of individual success stories and a general sense that political actors – parties, interest groups, individuals – are putting a lot of time and energy in using social media for campaigning. At the same time, few Swedes seem to believe that the

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[2] The number is based on information given by Facebook's advertisement department: however, the numbers are probably inflated since it is possible to register multiple profiles and it is impossible to say by how much. Sweden has a population of slightly above 9 million.

Internet is changing democracy for the good (Findahl 2010: 45). On the other hands, for politically interested people, Facebook and other Internet services are regarded as extremely important political tools (ibid: 47).

Returning to the two quotes above, this paper will try to provide a picture of the reasoning of different individuals in making up their minds about participating or not participating. Following this introduction, a brief overview of the theoretical field of political participation and social media is provided. After a note on method, the results from the interviews are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion.

2. Political Participation and Social Media: New Hopes for Democracy?

I think that I see political statements everyday on FB and on Twitter. […] If you look at Facebook specifically you see both push and pull views:

Pull:
- individuals' political views according to info
- individuals' membership in political groups, in issues, interest organisations or parties

Push:
- shared links showing up in news feed
- status updates
- mail
- wall postings
- person to person messages/videos/pictures – male, 41, active in an interest group

An ongoing discussion in democracy research is concerned with the question of whether the level of political participation in the industrialised or post-industrial countries is sinking or not. The academic debate might be partitioned into two lines of argumentation. The line championed by, among others, Robert Putnam (2000), maintains that political participation is decreasing as the level of social capital in society wanes with increasing individualisation and political apathy. Another line, represented by, among others, Russell J. Dalton (2008; see also Dahlgren 2009), argues contrarily that the forms of participation are merely

changing and are taking on new forms, as post-materialist values (Inglehart 1977, esp. pp. 262-321) become more salient, with individualisation actually reinforcing social capital. Instead of enrolling in political parties and other formal organisations, citizens are now to a greater extent canalising their engagement outside of the traditional political system (cf. Micheletti 2003; Bentivegna 2006; Baringshorst 2009).

As ICTs have become more prevalent, cheaper and useful since the rapid spread of internet connections in the 1990s, social science has increasingly turned its eyes towards the web as a promise of a more democratic future (e.g. Rheingold 2000; Becker & Slaton 2000) or as a dynamic machine concentrating ever more power into the hands of the few (e. g. Van de Donk, et al. 1995; Hindman 2008). The development of applications often referred to as Web 2.0 and social media in the mid-2000s, combined with anecdotal evidence of new forms of rapid networked mobilisation (cf. Rheingold 2002; Jenkins 2006; Benkler 2006), created a new interest in the effects of technology on political participation.

Like the invention of previous technologies such as the telegraph, the radio or television (Vanobberghen 2007, Hoff and Bjerke 2009), the internet fostered hopes for an invigorated public using technologies to learn about and promote political and social causes for the good of humanity. Political participation makes people grow as individuals, leading to emancipation as well as to better governance (Norris 2002: 5). Hence, the debate has centred on the need for mass participation and whether internet use promotes it or not.

According to the Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba et al 1995), explaining factors for political participation include resources (time, money, skills), engagement (interest, knowledge, efficacy), and recruitment (ibid: 269). I would

argue that social media might theoretically influence all three categories. Whereas income, education and time in itself would not be affected by using social media, a wider repertoire of political activities (such as various forms of online participation) is available compared to the old way of attending meetings in formal organisations (Joyce 2007). Considering engagement, some researchers have found causal effects of social media on political knowledge in empirical investigations, explaining the effect with the "surprise effect" of unexpected political social media content, offsetting the effect of already politically interested people actively searching for political information on the internet (Cantijoch et al 2008: 6; Sweetser & Kaid 2008). Previous research has also established a strong connection between social capital and political participation; in particular, the link between weak ties and participation. According to Mark S. Granovetter (1973: 1374), "people rarely act on mass-media information unless it is also transmitted through personal ties; otherwise one has no particular reason to think that an advertised product or an organization should be taken seriously." This relationship has been found in the political field in several empirical studies. Jan Teorell study found that as the number of weak ties increases, the likelihood of participation also increases. If a person's social network is large, the chance that he or she will be asked to participate is higher (Teorell 2003). Organising weak ties in social network sites allows for an individual to stay connected to brief acquaintances also when moving to another geographical area, thereby expanding the network and increasing the possibility of recruitment.

3. Method

On Facebook I have friends who have real, strong views on various political initiatives, but also those who work in PR and use their status to get out a message that they to a certain extent have been paid for. Hopefully they have not taken on clients where they oppose the message, so I can take their status for real, but since I know who they are, I can also "listen less" to them when they are working. – male, 30, not active

This paper uses material from an ongoing study on Swedish social media users. The respondents have been interviewed in focus groups. Focus groups are useful when the purpose is not to generalise, but to study the motives, experiences and thought processes of individuals not obtainable through extensive methods like surveys or other data management, to explore a new field; to generate hypotheses; and to develop interview guides (Rezabek 2000; Stewart & Williams 2005:398).

Since one aim of the study was to discover differences in the reasoning of people already active in politics as opposed to people not active in politics, three virtual asynchronous focus groups were created; one comprised by members of political parties; one comprised by members of interest groups; and one comprised by people not active in politics nor members of interest groups. Virtual focus groups were chosen on the basis of convenience: some of the advantages of virtual focus groups are lower costs for travel expenses and transcription and allows for more flexibility for participants as they can answer questions and discuss when they want to. The participants were recruited using a snowballing technique: Facebook and Twitter were used to ask contacts of the author to forward the invitation to the study. On one hand, this proved to be a successful strategy as I could recruit my participants in a short period of time; on the other hand self-selection might have attracted people with a special interest in social media research. These interviews were conducted from 18th November to 8th December 2009.

In addition, a 'traditional' focus group was created, comprised by university students taking an international relations class. In this case, self-selection was probably less prevalent, although the students participated voluntarily. This group was comprised by individuals not active in political organisations or interest groups[3]. This interview was conducted in December 2009.

The final sample contained 40 individuals, ranging in age from 19 to 58 years, with a majority being 19-34 year olds. Almost all of them had university degrees or were university students. A semi-structured discussion form was applied, using set questions but allowing for free answers. All quotes from the interviews in this paper are translated from Swedish by the author.

The resulting transcripts were analysed and organised according to recurring themes and categories in the answers (Turner 1981). The following section is a descriptive analysis of the discussions.

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[3] Further interviews with members of political parties and members of interest groups respectivelsy are to be completed later this spring.

4. Results

But, like, I think it could probably be a good way, because even if you're not that interested you might check it out anyway […] Before, I haven't been that interested, it's mostly those big guys, Ohly and Reinfeldt[4] and the others, but now it's lesser politicians so to speak who are reaching out, so you will at least check them out. […] But if it would go any further, if you join one of those groups, you might not do that, but at least you look stuff up." – female, 19, not active

Participants[5] in all groups, regardless of whether they are active or not, say that they encounter a lot of political messages and attempts of recruitment on Facebook. The political content is generally seen as something positive. Shared links and status updates from friends are considered an important source of information and as a valuable complement to other sources of information, such as other mass media. This is especially important for individuals with special interests: one participant born in Iran mentioned the 'media filter' provided by her Iranian friends and relatives around the world as a crucial way of keeping herself up to date with what happened during the 'green revolution' in 2009. Unsurprisingly, political party members generally value political information coming directly from parties and politicians without intermediaries citing that they follow politics actively on Facebook and Twitter, and that it is there that they hear of news first. For these participants, getting first hand information about political events is an advantage with using social media. This is also common among members of interest groups, although to a lesser extent.

Non active participants are more passive: rather than actively following political events, organisations or politicians, they react when they are exposed to political content in status updates, comments, invitations, shared links or information about their friends joining a group. This is in line with the hypothesis

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[4] Lars Ohly, chairman of the Left Party and Fredrik Reinfeldt, chairman of the Conservative Party and prime minister of Sweden.
[5] In this section, participants in the focus groups are referred to as 'participants' regardless of whether they take part in acts political participation or not.

that social media users might get accidentally exposed to political information, thereby gaining knowledge and perhaps being prompted to participate themselves. There is however no guarantee that mere exposure will lead to action or even learning.

Party members and members of interest groups also mention that they appreciate the way that tools like Facebook make communication within political networks easier: instead of maintaining and updating mailing lists, people can inform themselves and communicate with one another without the need of an administrator.

Recruitment attempts to Facebook groups or other types of more active involvement are seen widely different by participants. Several politically active participants complain over the amount of invitations to political groups that they receive. It is not surprising that politically active people receive a lot of invitations or recruitment attempts since they can be assumed to have friends who are also active in politics and that recruitment might be directed towards people who are already known to be active (Verba et al 1995: 133). People or groups "spamming" invites are seen with contempt and as a result of "bad information manners". Kleis Nielsen (2009) describes how the ease with which it is possible to inform or invite people in political campaigns through social media can be counterproductive to its mobilising purposes. "Overcommunication, miscommunication and communicative overload" make activists annoyed and tired and unwilling to accept requests. A common view (among participants in all groups) is that invitations to groups should be carefully screened. A couple of party members state that Facebook users joining too many groups do not appear to be serious.

Some participants (party members and members of interest groups) are unequivocally positive towards invitations of this sort. There is always the option of ignoring the invitation; if something is in line with your political views, it is all fine and you can join it.

Other participants avoid joining groups as a principle: it is time consuming to research every group in order to decide whether it is serious or not, and so they abstain completely. The sender of an invitation is generally considered to be important: if the organisation or person behind it is trustworthy, or a close friend, it is more likely that the request will be accepted. A common attitude for all participants regardless of group is that you should be careful with what groups you join: it matters what views other people associate you with.

Among members of interest groups there seems to be a general caution against invitations with a clear political sender: they might consider joining groups supporting specific issues but only if they are not identifiable on a right-left political scale. The wish not wanting to be associated with political parties or political ideologies might be interpreted as a consequence of a development of more political engagement being channelled outside of the formal political system, but then again, it is not exactly a new phenomenon that people so not want to be associated with political parties. Participants who are working professionally with interest groups do not want to be tied to political parties as this might interfere with their professional role.

One reason for not accepting requests is not wanting to expose your political views to others – whether they can tie you to a political party or not. This is not mentioned by party members, but several non active participants. Some of them mention the fear that potential employers might look them up on Facebook.

Others think that political views are private and should not be expressed in a semi-public forum like Facebook. Knowing that "anyone" can see what you are saying invokes self-censorship. This feeling of being unsecure about whether Facebook is a public or private forum has connotations to what danah boyd (2008: 34) has described as the blurring of private and public in online networks.

A few party members also state that Facebook is not a proper arena for political statements, but for slightly other reasons: Twitter is more useful for that, whereas Facebook should be reserved for small talk. Twitter is used exclusively by participants who are active in political parties or in interest groups; none of the non active participants were Twitter users.

Non active participants generally receive few requests from others, and few of them accept requests. They have a lower esteem of Facebook as a vehicle for political participation than party members and members of interest groups. One reason they do not join groups is that they have difficulties sorting out the serious ones from the unserious ones. But when they get requests, or when they see that one of their friends have joined a group, many of them check out the content of the group without joining it or commenting on it. The non active participants dislike groups partly because they feel uncomfortable with the polarised atmosphere they experience in online discussions. They seem to mostly encounter negative messages in groups. One theme often mentioned in this group is anti-immigration sentiments, often in connection to the Sweden Democrats. They also point out that Facebook is not a good forum for dealing with difficult issues – how are you supposed to answer difficult questions with a simple yes or no? Some non actives also reported that they had posted things on Facebook that they felt were important political issues, and had become sad when none of their

friends had commented on it. This was taken to be a sign that Facebook should be reserved for discussing lighter themes.

Another difference between party members and members of interest groups on one side and non active participants on the other is that non actives do not see the point in online participation. For more politically active participants, online participation is a useful complement to traditional forms of participation, whereas the non actives – who do not participate in traditional forms either – online participation is of no use. They do not see that joining a group on Facebook has any bearing on what happens in real life. Several non actives also state that they find political content on Facebook hard to take seriously – there is no control over who can start an initiative or what a group can be called, and they feel despair over the fact that groups named "We send text messages every day!" can have a hundred thousand members, whereas serious political initiatives only attract dozens. According to some of them, media reports on Facebook activism are used to legitimise opinions with scant support and to merely produce content, and this is seen as further proof on why participation through social media is not meaningful.

When it comes to whether political content in social media transforms into political participation, the message is mixed from all groups. For party members, there is already a natural way of engaging with political issues. But both party members and members of interest groups state that they have reacted to information about political issues in social media by discussing it with friends, signing petitions and contacting decision makers directly. One party member states that never reacts on information provided through Facebook by joining

groups or participating online, but through discussing and contacting. For others, Facebook offers yet another arena of political participation.

Among the non active participants, this is extremely rare. One participant tells a story of how the students on her former high school were mobilised through Facebook to protest the low quality of the school lunches. A large proportion of the students went on lunch strike for a day and provided their own food, prompting the school leadership to improve the quality. Non actives also pointed out the potential of successful mobilisation rather than reporting that they had experienced it.

5. Discussion

> *It feels a little sad sometimes, you know? You go on Facebook once an hour and there is nothing new. Don't know if you get a lot out of it, really. It's pure routine.* – male, 26, not politically active

Taking into mind the discussion above about new forms of networked participation becoming more common while engagement in the formal political system and in organisations, it might seem paradoxical that people not engaged in organisations seem to be even more conservative in their views on what constitutes proper political participation. It is on the one hand clear that people already active in political or social issues, organised in political parties or in interest groups, generally have a more positive view of political content, mobilisation and participation in social media. Politically active participants see social media as a complement to their organised engagement, valuable for communicating, organising and sharing information as well as providing a wider repertoire of political acts, such as joining groups, signing petitions, or just expressing their views. There does not seem to be a big difference in the views

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and attitudes between party members and members of interest groups. Instead, the differences appear clearly when comparing non actives with actives. Although it is not in any way strange that individuals not active in politics already are not as inclined as actives to participate in social media or share political views, it is also clear that the non actives in this study do not take political participation or politics lightly. They have clear views of what political participation should look like, that it should be honest and serious, and that difficult issues should not be reduced to polarised rants. The non actives in this study could also be seen as constituting a group of potential political activists; well educated social media users with an interest in politics although they refrain from making their political views public.

What also seems to be important is that the non actives seem to be curious regarding political information in social media: when exposed to it, they reach out for more, although not taking an active part in discussions or in trying to influence the government. What is the effect of political exposure through social media in the long run – obviously affecting both people who are engaged in politics, actively searching information as well as those who come across it by accident?

The results also raises the issue of whether the focus on activism in social media might serve as a boost in political importance for the few, already active citizens who take part in it. Are we seeing the birth of a new political elite, constituted by those who for some reason go beyond taking in information and using social media as a powerful tool to organise and influence politicians?

Finally, this study might serve as a reminder that a lot, if not most, of the political influence exerted through social media is unobtainable by just studying the content of social media sites. In order to fully understand the forces at play, intensive research using in depth interviews (or focus group interviews) can be

combined with extensive research methods establishing and measuring causal

effects of social media on political participation.

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