Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide
A Comparative Study

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Recent Shifts in the Relationship between the Internet and Democratic Engagement in Britain and the United States

Granularity, Informational Exuberance, and Political Learning

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2.1. Introduction

The internet is evolving into one of the most significant enablers of political innovation since the emergence of mass democracy. Over the past decade, few areas of social and political life have escaped its influence. Because of the potentially huge scope of the internet (see Chadwick and Howard 2009b; Chadwick 2006), this chapter has two interrelated objectives. First, following a brief explication of concepts, it discusses significant recent shifts in what we know, or should seek to know, about the internet’s role in promoting political knowledge and political engagement, with reference to some important strands of literature from the United States and Britain. Second, it generates some hypotheses about the likely effects of recent changes in the online environment, through discussion of British and U.S. examples of what is widely called web 2.0. The broad argument is that continuing to frame research in this area in terms of traditional understandings of engagement, participation, and deliberative democracy risks missing the significance of three key forces in the contemporary political context of these two countries: granularity, informational exuberance, and by-product political learning.

2.2. Web 2.0, Granularity, and Informational Exuberance

Though widely used, the concept of web 2.0 has eluded precise definition. Originally the creation of Silicon Valley technologists, web 2.0 has long since escaped the business community and is an idea that loosely organizes a variety of concerns across a range of scholarly disciplines. O’Reilly is widely regarded to have been the first to popularize the term in 2003. His technology-focused approach defined web 2.0 in terms of seven key principles: "the web as platform," "harnessing collective intelligence," "data is the next 'Intel inside,'" "the end of the software release cycle," "lightweight programming models," "software above the level of a single device," and "rich user experiences."
(O'Reilly 2007, 18, 22, 27, 30, 31, 33, 34). Chadwick and Howard (2009a) begin from these technological principles but explicate their relevance for politics and suggest the following formulation: “the internet as a platform for political discourse; the collective intelligence emergent from political web use; the importance of data over particular software and hardware applications; perpetual experimentalism in the public domain; the creation of small scale forms of political engagement through consumerism; the propagation of political content over multiple applications; and rich user experiences on political websites” (Chadwick and Howard 2009a, 4).

Granularity is a metaphorical concept that has long been used in computer science, but it has recently spread into other fields, such as management, information systems, and law. Benkler extends the computer science approach by observing that most successful examples of online collaboration involve breaking up large projects into smaller modules. In Benkler’s (2006, 100–101) terms, granularity is understood as the “size of the modules, in terms of the time and effort that an individual must invest in producing them.” He goes on to argue that success is more likely when the majority of modules are “relatively fine-grained,” (Benkler 2006, 101) although there are instances of projects with coarse-grained contributions, as in the collaborative production of Linux, the open-source computer operating system.

Building on Benkler’s approach, in this chapter granularity refers to the extent to which the creation of informational public goods may be disaggregated into tasks of varying magnitude, where magnitude is understood as a function of resources, such as time, knowledge, experience, cognitive processing, and so on, which people are able to mobilize in the pursuit of individual and collective goals. Sociotechnical environments that have different degrees of granularity designed in—to allow citizens to innovate and perform citizenship in diverse ways—are more likely to be successful and to produce greater aggregated effects, where success and effects can be defined in any number of ways beneficial to democracy. One-size-fits-all environments in which classically deliberative encounters are the expectation require citizens to complete tasks that are of a much greater magnitude than those expected in nondeliberative environments.

By informational exuberance I mean to capture the increasing willingness of nonelites to contribute to the collective production, reworking, and sharing of media content, with the conscious or unconscious aim of creating public goods for formal and informal political organization, coordination, and aggregation. These may include, for example, firsthand reports of events, personal narratives, conversations, commentary, opinion, archives, spatial and temporal information, and lifestyle and consumption behavior, all of which may be expressed in textual and/or audiovisual forms. In the United States and Britain, much of citizens’ public informational exuberance as it relates to politics takes place online or is conducted through mechanisms that involve rapid and subtle switching between online and offline realms. Because of the granularity that characterizes the most popular online environments for politics in the two
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countries, most informational exuberance is nondeliberative, if deliberation is understood in the classical Athenian or Habermasian senses. By this, I mean that the small-scale forms of political engagement that have proliferated online over the past half-decade are far removed from the demanding models of the deliberative and discursive democracy that provided the yardsticks for so many interpretations of the internet — both positive and negative — during the early years of scholarship in the field. And I believe that these new forms may be all the more powerful for that.

Granularity and informational exuberance present challenges to deeply embedded assumptions about the relationship of media, information, and politics, but they arguably form the social roots of a new phase in the evolution of political participation, collective action, and democratic innovation.

2.3. Information, Learning, and Engagement

Social scientists have long sought to understand how information shapes political participation. Early empirical studies of U.S. public opinion from the 1940s and 1950s often found that individuals rarely lived up to the ideal of the informed citizen. Although citizens usually reported some basic awareness of political events, most devoted more energy and attention to nonpolitical information, particularly entertainment. However, some scholars argued that individuals were able to derive sufficient information from the press, radio, and television through “by-product learning.” This concept, first elaborated by Downs (1957), assumes that, if given the choice, most citizens will avoid consuming political information and will instead seek out entertainment. In the context of a media environment in which choice is limited, citizens are often exposed to political information by accident: their daily diet of sports, music, movies, and celebrity gossip is interspersed with television and radio news bulletins that are hard to avoid. Downs concluded that a basic level of political knowledge — certainly sufficient to enable informed participation in elections — was a healthy by-product of a mixed information ecology. By-product learning was said to soften informational inequalities between social groups; ensure broad popular awareness of key political events; and most crucially, spur us to act on that knowledge come Election Day.

Since Downs’s study, the proliferation of multichannel television and the internet have radically increased the quantity of information available to the majority of citizens in advanced Western democracies, and the original conditions under which by-product learning was first proposed have vanished. But what of the aggregate effects of those developments? The argument for by-product learning was hatched in an era of relative media scarcity, but for some scholars it has started to look less secure in the rather different context of a virtually limitless choice of media content. In an early study of the internet’s contribution to democracy, Sunstein (2001) argued that individuals were predisposed to filter and sort information about the social world in ways that accord with their preexisting preferences. When the technological tools
to do this are highly refined and widely available, as they now are online, Sunstein argued that citizens created information echo chambers: meticulously personalized spheres of communication that reflect, but do not challenge, their predilections and prejudices.

Prior (2005, 2007) has demonstrated empirically that, in the United States, individuals with a preference for entertainment have far greater opportunities for avoiding news than they did during the so-called golden age of broadcast television from the 1950s to the early 1980s. Before the diffusion of cable and satellite television and the internet, Prior argues, individuals watched a lot of television, but this was not a bad thing. Learning about politics via this medium was easier than learning through print media because television relied on images and the spoken word. For those predisposed to watching entertainment programming, by-product learning about politics while watching television played an important role in encouraging them to vote. During the mid-1960s (terrestrial broadcast television’s heyday in the United States) each household had access to an average of just 6.8 stations. Similarly, in late 1970s Britain there were only three stations per household. Today, 85 percent of American and 90 percent of British households face a bewildering, yet empowering choice of cable and satellite stations, and substantially more than two-thirds of those populations can access vast swaths of online content at home (Internet World Stats 2008; United Kingdom Office of Communications 2010). In 2010, 88 percent of the population of the United Kingdom owned a mobile phone, 40 percent watched television online, and 23 percent reported using their mobile devices to access the internet and watch television programs (U.K. Office of Communications 2010).

The high-choice media environment in the United States and Britain enables those with a preference for politics to satisfy their cravings in ways that were unimaginable only a couple of decades ago. But for Sunstein and Prior, in this environment it is much less likely that those uninterested in politics will be accidentally exposed to political content. As Prior (2007, 134) puts it, “Even though political information is abundant and more readily available than ever before, political knowledge has decreased for a substantial portion of the electorate: entertainment fans with access to new media. Ironically, the share of politically uninformed people has risen since we entered the so-called ‘information age.’”

More recently, these and several related assumptions have been placed at the center of Bennett and Iyengar’s (2008) argument that we are entering a new era of “minimal effects,” as media fragmentation becomes more deeply embedded and aligned with broader social changes associated with postindustrialism, such as the decline of solidaristic social and political institutions. Paradoxically, therefore, abundant information is said to create incentive structures that increase political apathy and polarization at the same time as they further stratify civic and political engagement. But is this always the case? Recent shifts in the literature on the internet and engagement, discussed next, suggest that things might not be this straightforward.
2.4. Some Recent Shifts in the U.S. and British Literature

In the radically fragmented media environments of the contemporary Anglo-American democracies, researching the diverse ways in which individuals interact with media, and precisely how those interactions may or may not shape political behavior, has become a huge challenge.

2.4.1. Analytical and Methodological Uncertainty

An initial contextual point here is that, despite the growth of the literature base over the past decade, the study of the Internet and engagement has been characterized by a general sense of analytical and methodological uncertainty. Although this could be said of many areas of the social sciences, it is a sign that political communication is a field in transition following a major exogenous shock.

Most early behavioral studies of the effects of Internet use on civic and political participation emerged from the United States and tended to find that the Internet's overall influence was minimal. The medium was more likely to provide further opportunities for political engagement for those who were already politically engaged (Bimber 2001; Hill and Hughes 1998; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, only a small minority of citizens used the Internet for political information. Early British studies tended to reinforce these findings. For example, anywhere between 4 percent and 10 percent of survey respondents, depending on the survey, used the medium for information during the 2004 European Parliament and 2005 general election campaigns (Lusoli and Ward 2005; Norris and Curtice 2007). Meanwhile, some U.S. empirical studies of online behavior substantiated the argument for the end of by-product learning by observing, for example, how people actually consume online news. Tewksbury's (2003) analysis of website logs found that readers of online news tended to avoid content about public affairs and instead preferred that about sports and entertainment.

A recent meta-analysis of thirty-eight mainstream empirical studies of the Internet and engagement in the United States unearths a total of 166 separate effects (Boulianne 2009). It reveals that most studies have attempted to use as dependent variables some fairly standard measures of civic and political participation derived from pre-Internet political science in the American pluralist tradition (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Political participation is usually operationalized as traditional behaviors that are obviously focused on political institutions and shaping policy, such as voting, donating money, attending meetings, letter writing, discussing issues, and so on, although it may also include less formal behavior such as protesting in marches and demonstrations, volunteering in the local community, and signing petitions. The standard independent variables have usually included Internet use or nonuse, number of hours spent online, different technology uses (e.g., e-mail, web browsing, instant messaging), or online and offline media consumption habits. The consumption of news has, for understandable reasons in liberal democratic
contexts, been perceived as a particularly important independent variable for political engagement. Most of the U.S. studies have used multivariate statistical analysis and have controlled for variables that shape participation, such as education and income. A surprisingly high proportion of empirical work has used web surveys to gather data, and many studies have focused on subsamples of internet users derived from random-digit-dialing telephone surveys. The majority of studies model internet use as affecting participation, but some studies reverse this, by assessing how prior levels of engagement affect internet use. Some include only online activity in their measures of political participation (e.g., Kobayashi, Ikeda, and Miyata 2006). Some combine online and offline behavior into composite scales but do not distinguish between effects on online and offline action (e.g., Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman 2003; Wellman et al. 2001). The majority test internet use effects only on offline action. These uncertainties raise questions that arguably deserve greater attention, especially given the recent shifts in the nature of the online environment.

2.4.2. The Abundance and Complexity of Information

Although she does not explore it in detail, a key finding of Boulianne's (2009) meta-analysis is a consensus that the internet has a small but positive effect on participation and that the effect is becoming stronger over time. What might underlie this development? Contrary to the thesis on the end of by-product learning of Sunstein and Prior, or the argument of a new era of minimal effects of Bennett and Iyengar, some have theorized that the characteristics of political information online—its quantity, richness, timeliness, and accessibility—create a media environment more beneficial for the acquisition of the knowledge and skills required for politics. In an ongoing series of team-authored studies, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) and colleagues integrate several large U.S. data sets to examine whether informational uses of the internet encourage civic and political engagement when compared with traditional media, especially newspapers. Their early results revealed that the internet played only a minor role in this regard, although a significant finding from a 2001 study was that using the internet to exchange political information generates higher levels of political trust than uses of traditional print and broadcast news media (Shah, McLeod, and Yoon 2001).

The latest U.S. studies, however, are beginning to get under the skin of the internet's functions in everyday communication about politics and how these functions may lead to civic and political engagement. They reveal the emergence of a more complex political communication environment, with the internet rivaling, and in some U.S. work, exceeding, television and newspaper consumption as a spur to engagement (Shah et al. 2005). A range of mediation and interaction effects among traditional media use, direct campaign messages, interpersonal communication, and online interactivity have been observed (Shah et al. 2007). As Shah and colleagues (2007, 696) put it, "Online news use and interactive political messaging - uses of the web as a
resource and a forum — both strongly influence civic and political participation.” And these findings have been reinforced by a recent book by Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2008, 47–66), who discover that across three American national election campaigns (2000, 2002, and 2004), those who read political news online were more likely to have higher levels of political knowledge and political interest and were more likely to engage in discussions about politics.

This shift toward a more complex understanding of the internet and engagement is starting to inform the British literature. For example, Norris and Curtice’s (2007) analysis of internet use during the 2005 British general election finds evidence of a classic two-step flow of communication. The two-step flow model, first proposed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) and much discussed since, argues that specialized forms of political communication, such as manifestos, speeches, and website content, are unlikely to reach a mass audience but are highly likely to reach informed activists. Those activists, called opinion leaders, engage in interpersonal discussion with those in their immediate surroundings, thus indirectly informing the less engaged. Norris and Curtice (2007) demonstrate that those who go online to acquire political information are statistically more likely to talk to others about the election (both online and offline) than those who do not go online. As they conclude, “it appears that the reach of the internet during the 2005 election campaign was rather greater than appears to be the case from simply looking at how many people used the Internet for themselves to find out about the election” (Norris and Curtice 2007, 41).

The discovery of more complex, often interpersonal flows of political information and more diverse internet usage patterns by citizens in Britain and the United States should come as less of a surprise if we consider how the supply of opportunities for online political activity has increased since the internet’s early period of diffusion in the mid-1990s. As web technologies have evolved and expanded over the past decade, so, too, have the political repertoires available to citizens. Early work in this area was based on the assumption of an online realm in which basic websites formed the core experience of those wishing to pursue politics online. Few could have foreseen the recent rapid innovations in networked online software services. Not only do American and British citizens now have many more opportunities to participate in mediated politics, but also the means by which they are able to do so are far more granular and interpersonal than they once were.

2.4.3. Revisionist Perspectives on Deliberation

A recent shift in the U.S. literature on political deliberation also has implications for the internet and engagement. Deliberation has provided an important organizing perspective and normative model for scholarship on the internet and politics (for an overview, see Chadwick 2006). Yet just as the literature on the internet and engagement has recently shifted toward an emphasis on granularity and complexity, so, too, has the broader literature on deliberative
democracy. These revisionist approaches ought to inform studies of democratic innovation online.

There has long been a divide between normative and empirical approaches to deliberation (Thompson 2008). Mutz (2008, 522) has gone as far as to suggest that “frustration remains on both sides due to our inability to accept one another’s assumptions and even to understand one another’s terms.” Studies of the internet, especially those studies in the United States, have replicated this divide because they have often been fueled by highly unrealistic expectations of citizen behavior, not just in normative terms but also empirically. At stake here is the extent to which the ethical justifications for the promotion of deliberative democracy may be operationalized as testable hypotheses and applied to deliberation in real-world settings by social scientists, where the real world firmly includes the online environment. Mutz argues that studies of deliberation should move away from all-or-nothing approaches, such as the assumption that deliberation creates legitimate consensus. Instead, she advocates a new orientation based on Merton’s (1957) well-known idea of theories of the “middle range” (Mutz 2008, 522). Taking Mutz’s view on board means moving away from deliberation as the supreme independent variable and universally positive outcome, and toward exploring mechanisms that “partially comprise deliberation” (Mutz 2008, 531). Rather than seeking to construct increasingly elaborate normative edifices that can then be applied to deliberative encounters, we ought to generate more circumscribed hypotheses about the conditions under which specific desiderata from deliberative theory may or may not be achieved. We ought also to consider whether deliberative modes of decision making are in fact always suitable for the production of particular outcomes desirable for democratic politics, such as citizens’ political interest, sense of political efficacy, and so on.

Part of the problem here is that the majority of the studies of online democracy begin from the assumption that “true” deliberation is, in itself, always and everywhere, intrinsically valuable; they then tend to conclude that an online environment is or is not deliberative (e.g., Hindman 2009). In terms of Mutz’s critique, such studies have developed criteria that may be used to assess online communication for its deliberateness without questioning either whether a setting meets those criteria actually produces the desired outcomes or, more important for my argument, whether nondeliberative contexts are capable of producing the democratic goods that deliberative contexts are supposed to create, but so often fail to do so.

2.5. Web 1.0 to Web 2.0: Three Arguments on the Transition

At least three important arguments flow from these recent shifts in the U.S. and U.K. literatures on the internet, engagement, and deliberation.

The first is that citizens’ digital network repertoires (Chadwick 2007) have expanded considerably and studies of online engagement in the United States and Britain are steadily catching up. Work that conceptualizes the internet as a social platform for producing the online goods of modern political life, and partly even those of modern democratic life, has yielded results that fit well within a new political culture. Though some of the recent investigations in the United States have somewhat underestimated the role of the internet in political life (Lusoli 2008).

We can make greater progress here by understanding that online engagement, deliberation, and even participation is a means to an end, and that the latter need not be political. Mutz argues that we should not presuppose any particular outcomes with respect to deliberative environments, but that outcomes desirable for democratic politics are not the only outcomes for political participation on the internet. We need to think about whether the criteria used to assess deliberation in the psychological and sociological literatures are the right criteria to use in the political context. Other criteria, such as the degree of political homogeneity (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2008), might be more relevant for understanding political engagement and the outputs of deliberative environments. Work that relates the empirical evidence of deliberative network effects to democratic outcomes and political differences is needed.

That said, the recent rise of the deliberative turn in political analysis is of great significance.
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as a simple conduit for the vertical transmission of messages from source to receiver appears limited. Even the two-step flow model is a limited tool for making sense of these trends. The internet is a multifaceted medium, and it partly functions as a series of network mechanisms for the organization of horizontal, interpersonal, communication among citizens. The useful knowledge that flows through these networks stimulates involvement in political campaigns and other civically beneficial activities, and this knowledge is increasingly, though not exclusively, derived from online, not traditional, sources (Shah et al. 2007). There is also evidence that these kinds of effects are more strongly created by, and experienced among, those who are less involved in traditional political activity, such as women and young people (Pasek et al. 2009; Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward 2005).

With so many recent quantitative and qualitative shifts in online behavior, as greater numbers of people have become involved not only in the consumption but also in the production of digital content, we need to disaggregate what we mean by “the internet” and operationalize the diverse range of activities that occur in the online environment when compared with much simpler, one-to-many media such as television. Although there are, at the time of writing, no published studies that explore this question (but see Bode 2010), as I have argued previously (Chadwick 2009a), it is a reasonable hypothesis that hugely popular user-generated content sites such as YouTube and social networking environments such as Facebook encourage more by-product learning about politics than do static web pages. Although the internet’s enormous potential for political information retrieval does not imply that individuals will always use it for those ends, and it is clear that attitudinal variables such as partisanship will act as important mediators, there is a danger that we neglect opportunities for by-product learning in the online environment. A recent review of the literature on online news posits, among other things, that many use the internet in the same way that they use other media, and general browsing is just as important as echo-chamber-style filtering (Tewksbury and Rittenberg 2009). Other studies have found that it is practically impossible for citizens to avoid dissonant views in the online environment (Garrett 2005); that ideological segregation online is typically lower than in face-to-face social interactions (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010); and that citizens typically engage in much political discussion in online arenas that are formally nonpolitical, such as those related to hobbies and lifestyles (Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009). Indeed, there is evidence that even during the period of the early web, before blogging, social networking sites, and user-generated content expanded, individuals sought out dissonant views (Brundidge and Rice 2009; Stromer-Galley 2003) and they did experience by-product learning effects (Tewksbury, Weaver, and Maddex 2001). In other words, media fragmentation may not always lead to minimal effects; it may simply be that the sources and modalities of these effects are different in the new media environment (Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010).

The second point to be made about these recent shifts is that it is less analytically useful to conceptualize engagement and participation along the lines
first established during the early wave of empirical research. Many of the current assumptions about how to measure engagement date from the wave of studies from the Anglo-American world of the late 1980s and early 1990s (see, e.g., Verba et al. 1993; Parry, Moyer, and Day 1992). But given that solely online political expression is a growing part of citizens’ political behavior, is it sufficient to model the effects of simple internet-use variables (e.g., time spent online) on solely offline behaviors (e.g., voting, attending town hall meetings)? Foot and Schneider (2006) convincingly argue that political websites should be understood as distinctive zones of political action: “surfaces on which campaigns’ production practices are inscribed over time and evolving structures that simultaneously manifest and enable political action.” I have argued elsewhere that “repertoire switches” spatially (between online and offline realms) and temporally (within and between campaigns) characterize political mobilization (Chadwick 2007, 283). How citizens use and contribute to informational exuberance, together with the rapid expansion of a diverse range of meaningful online opportunities for political action, present challenges to the assumptions of the first wave of literature on the internet and engagement.

The third point is that revisionist critiques of the deliberation literature (Mutz 2008; Fung 2007) are highly pertinent for understanding recent shifts in the nature of the internet’s role in democratic innovation. Although these critiques do not use the term, these approaches assume granularity. There is no natural, immutable link between a set of normative principles and institutional design across all policy problems and contexts. Equally, there ought to be no assumption that democratic goods are always more likely to emerge from classically deliberative encounters. As Fung (2007, 445–456) puts it, “A democrat for whom deliberation and public reason are cardinal values need not prescribe citizen deliberation, or even deliberation, for every problem.... Democratic theorists should widen their sources of inspiration and constraint to include the disciplined consideration of the consequences of the fullest range of institutional alternatives for collective decision making and action.”

In the remainder of the chapter, by way of illustration, I sketch out a range of intriguing themes that emerge from recent developments in the United States and Britain. These ought to be on the research agendas of all scholars interested in the internet and engagement.

2.6. Granularity in Web 2.0 Politics

The internet’s role in daily life has changed a great deal over the past five years. Contemporary web applications are dominated by a distinctive usability ethos that was often absent from the earlier phases of web development. Early critical accounts of internet-mediated politics often bemoaned the growth of a digital divide between do-it-yourself websites and the glitzy, professionalized sites of the wealthy and powerful. Although it would be a mistake to ignore the function, the internet’s role in web-based social networking and messaging (notably Facebook, Twitter, etc.) is often the principle thing, e.g. "even if the web is a simple tool, it provides users a platform to express their feelings and ideas to others (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, etc.)."

Debates about participation in online communities and the nature of citizens’ contributions to democratization are part of a larger discussion about how citizens can learn about and participate in their government.

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Footnote:

1 This section and the following section expand on Chadwick 2009b, 26–33.
ignore the sophisticated backend technologies that enable web 2.0 sites to function, the usability doctrines of figures such as Nielsen (1999) and Maeda (2008) have had a major influence on the look and feel of the contemporary web. Accessibility and ease of use are the core principles of extremely simple messaging platforms such as “tumblelogs” (see http://www.tumblr.com) and Twitter (http://www.twitter.com). The U.K. MySociety projects are based on the principle that small is beautiful, and they enable citizens to do one simple thing, easily and elegantly (http://www.mysociety.org). TheyWorkForYou (http://www.theyworkforyou.com), for example, provides an intuitive searchable interface to Hansard, the record of all British parliamentary proceedings. Debates are listed in an easy-to-follow format, but more important, they allow citizens to comment on specific parliamentarians' speeches. Once submitted, citizens' comments appear alongside the original speeches, and citizens are able to comment on the comments of others. The site also provides opportunities to learn about the views and behavior of members of Parliament, including their voting record, speeches, committee membership, and entries in the register of members' interests. In granular sociotechnical environments such as this, complexity emerges from the aggregation of many simple contributions.

High-, medium-, and low-threshold tools for democratic innovation exist side by side in a panoply of online environments, such as threaded discussion forums, group and individual blogs, wikis, audio messaging, video messaging, social networking profile pages, friend lists, shared calendars, shared address books, shared document databases, shared spreadsheets, and shared tag clouds. This list could be extended. Many web services rely on large numbers of individuals behaving with regularity in low-threshold ways. A threshold is here understood to be a function of an individual’s calculation about the expected utility of participating in a given activity, on the basis of the likelihood of participation by others (Granovetter 1973; Miller and Page 2004; Olson 1965). The key point about low-threshold political behavior online is that much of the technological architecture of web 2.0 applications designs in low- and high-threshold activities and many variants in between. An example is the division of labor typified by many news aggregators and blogs such as Digg (http://www.digg.com), BBC News Online (http://www.bbc.co.uk), and AOL News (http://news.aol.com). This user-generated content circulates around reactive, storytelling models and a division of labor. Citizens write stories, and the sites open a sample of these to comments and ratings. Some tell the stories, others make brief comments, and others rate both the story and the comments with a simple click. Highly rated stories rise to the top of the list. Many of these stories begin life as stories about other stories—remixed versions of the content of others. A good policy example comes in the form of Frank, a user-generated element on the U.K. government’s drug-awareness site for young people (http://www.talktofrank.com). The page allows users to write and upload their own stories, thus providing an interesting combination of an information site with a public health agenda that relies on user content to help fulfill its role. The popularity of this approach is explained by the fact that it is a granular, not an all-or-nothing, model.
Quantitatively and qualitatively different forms of contribution are facilitated by the technological architecture. Many citizens seem to find mixing together sources of digital content originally created by others to be a compelling and worthwhile experience. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the political economy of political content creation has been transformed, it has shifted in significant ways.

Just as these environments lower thresholds for citizens, they also lower them for political elites. A major disadvantage of deliberative models is their high-stakes, one-size-fits-all approach. Many risk factors present themselves in this environment (Chadwick 2011a), but three are particularly salient. First, forum participation rates will be low, which will attract negative media coverage and, over time, deter citizens from entering a forum for fear of standing out. Second, the forum descends into irrelevance, or flame wars, and becomes heavily censored or an embarrassment. Third, the forum’s sponsors fear losing control of their agenda and so design in severe restrictions, overmoderate it, or disown it.

Granular environments, in which different repertoires of engagement sit side by side, from postings to comments, ratings, wiki editing, and so on, do not eliminate these risks but do reduce them. Consider, for example, the U.K. Foreign Office’s group blog (United Kingdom Foreign Office 2008). This features entries by the U.K. foreign minister, junior ministers, career civil servants, and occasionally guest writers. David Miliband, the British foreign secretary from 2007 to 2010, began blogging while a minister at the Department of the Environment. Miliband’s blog concentrated on policy and ministerial work and featured a commenting facility. The entries were moderated and rarely received large numbers of comments, although they were read by many (Hansard Society 2007). But the advantage of the blog format is that comments and interaction are not pivotal to the experience: many blogs have no comments, but this is generally accepted as part of the blogging ecology and does not deter their authors. The general sense of an ongoing flow of material in a conversational style also avoids the perception of a high-stakes, tightly managed environment. The amount of time and staff resources required to run a group blog are also less than those required to run a deliberative forum. Skeptics point to the fact that some politicians’ blogs are ghostwritten, but many are not. For example, the Hansard Society’s (2007) researchers found that Miliband wrote his own entries.

The hypothesis that increasing granularity reduces the risk of failure also relates to the presentation of politicians’ and officials’ online persona. Politicians’ blogs and YouTube videos tend to avoid jargon and formal stump-speech and press release genres. Microblogging services such as Twitter, the ultimate in low-threshold action because it permits individual messages only 140 characters long, take this informality to extremes. Yet many politicians have adopted microblogging with relish. As with blogging, there is much skepticism regarding politicians’ use of Twitter. Barack Obama was criticized for supposedly suspending his Twitter feed once elected in November 2008. However, the account...
was not in fact suspended and was used to publicize the White House's Open for Questions initiative of March 2009, for which, according to the White House site, “92,937 people submitted 103,981 questions and cast 3,602,595 votes” (U.S. White House 2009). Twitter has also provoked controversy on the grounds of its superficiality and transience, but it has evolved into a distributed back-channel medium at political meetings, as those present use it to converse with one another and with broader networks of followers. Twitter is also playing a major role in contributing to the hybridization of new and old media, by reconfiguring intraelitie communication among journalists and politicians, and by occasionally integrating nonelitie members of the public into news-making assemblages during important political events that are simultaneously mediated via other channels, most notably television (Chadwick 2011b).

The granularity of web 2.0 also offers more powerful means of increasing trust among online participants than the older models of political discourse based on open web pages, discussion forums, and Usenet. Trust is one of the most valuable and most elusive forces in online politics. Anonymity and pseudonymity may encourage freedom of expression, but they also constantly undermine sustained collaboration in problem solving. Government-run online consultations in Britain have been criticized for their insensitivity to how the sociotechnical environment encourages or undermines trust (Wright 2006). Web 2.0 environments do not wholly solve these problems, but in recent years some interesting models have emerged for sustainable co-production, reflecting a blend of self-governance and regulation (see Benkler 2006). Wikipedia relies on a mix of spontaneous self-correction by the army of volunteer Wikipedians and an expanding conception of hierarchy (entries are frequently locked down; prominent warnings are increasingly displayed at the top of contentious or incomplete entries). Politicians have started to experiment with such mechanisms. During the 2010 British general election campaign, the Conservative Party (now in government) ran two major wiki-style crowd-sourcing initiatives, the first on the Labour government’s final budget and the other on Labour’s manifesto. The budget consultation was particularly intriguing. Opposition parties in the United Kingdom are always at a disadvantage in the immediate aftermath of a new budget, where the information asymmetry is most acute as a result of the government’s ability to draw on civil service expertise for its approach. Minutes after the government’s document was published, the Conservatives uploaded it to an interactive website that enabled Conservative supporters to highlight and comment critically on the budget’s key priorities. The site received approximately a thousand comments, and those went on to shape the party’s response in the mainstream media.

2.7. Informational Exuberance and Political Learning in Web 2.0 Politics

It would be naive to suggest that co-production environments such as Wikipedia and Digg create the high levels of trust that are typical of face-to-face encounters such as deliberative polling. But they do encourage voice and loyalty while
discouraging exit (Hirschman 1970). In this sense, the small-scale interactions in these environments offer potentially valuable lessons for online deliberative consultations, where ease of exit has long been perceived as a barrier to citizen and government participation. Some of the online mechanisms of web 2.0 encourage greater trust through a variety of means that tap into citizens' informational exuberance: use of real names, continuous presence, clear archives, inclusion of photos, address details, and so on. These provide for a richer representation of a citizen's real-life identity. Interactions among citizens in these environments are a long way from the freewheeling libertarian ethos of Usenet in the 1980s and 1990s—much admired by the early e-democracy movement in the United States—but they do reduce the risk of politically embarrassing comments, and they offer balance by providing political elites with a greater sense of control over the terms of engagement.

Social networking sites provide areas in which individuals express many different facets of their identities and in which diverse lifestyles and values play out. The affordances of social network environments encourage us to build our lives online. As discussed already, it has been argued that the internet is a purposive medium and is therefore less likely to have by-product learning effects than other media, such as television, where serendipitous encounters with political information occur in the context of entertainment. But although this may have been true of earlier phases of the internet, the emergence of social networking applications has altered the context. Political life in Facebook occurs amid the everyday-life characteristics of the environment, in much the same way as third places function in community building, social capital, and civic engagement away from the home and the workplace (Oldenburg 1997). Politics here aligns itself with broader repertoires of self-expression and lifestyle values. Politics in Facebook goes to where people are, not where we would like them to be. In 2007, when Facebook opened up its code as a means of encouraging programmers to create extra features, this unleashed a wave of new applications. The majority of these applications are concerned with the expression of lifestyle choices and consumerism, but political applications, of which there were more than 1,200 by early 2009, include Causes, which in April 2009 averaged 2.3 million monthly active users mobilized around a vast array of topics, such as the environment, human rights, health care, trade, poverty, and organizations including political parties, advocacy groups, and trade unions (Facebook 2009a, 2009b).

Many Facebook profile pages are a mishmash of content and genres; music, film, and fashion sit alongside political campaigns, donation drives, and slogans. There is a substantial amount of political engagement around the technological affordances of Facebook itself, chiefly organized around civil libertarian mobilizations against the company's somewhat cavalier attitude to users' privacy. This is, therefore, a fragile and uncertain arena for politics, one that may erode at some future point as rival services meet demand for different principles for their sociotechnical environments. Although we must await empirical work in this area, it is a reasonable hypothesis that online social networking
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sites encourage greater by-product learning about politics than the simple web-sites of the past and, perhaps, the multichannel television environment. And we should not lose sight of the fact that Facebook is, again, a low-threshold communication environment, with features such as status updates, a wall, and groups, which allow users to comment on others’ profiles and to hold ongoing conversations in semipublic spaces.

The quality of citizens’ informational exuberance is, of course, the subject of debate. Some commentary on web 2.0 has focused on the rise of highly individualized forms of online expression and how these contribute to a broader social narcissism (Keen 2007). Some of the journalistic accounts of blogs and YouTube, for example, have criticized what are perceived as self-obsessed, egotistical communication genres. Some lament the rise of audiovisual content online, complaining that it signals the end of an innocent ideal of text-based communication free of the constraints of physical markers such as ethnicity, appearance, accent, and social class. As O’Loughlin (2001) shows, many of the early advocates of e-democracy celebrated the egalitarian quality of textual computer-mediated communication.

The emergence of visual communication genres online presents challenges to understandings of e-democracy. But is the news all bad? Over the past decade or so, some have sought to broaden the concerns of social and political theory to encompass the role of affective dimensions in the regulation of social life. Young (2000, 53–57) has written of political deliberation’s “internal” exclusionary dynamics, which subtly devalue informal and emotional discourse. More recently, Papacharissi (2009, 236–239), drawing on Inglehart and Welzel (2005), has argued for a “civically motivated narcissism,” based on the view that “self-expression values are connected to the desire to control one’s environment, a stronger desire for autonomy, and the need to question authority” and the claim that “self-expression values are not uncivic.” Citizen-produced audio and video deviate from the ideal of textual deliberative discourse, but in genres such as YouTube we can hypothesize that they democratize political expression by creating a new grassroots outlet for the affective in politics. We can see how certain policy sectors are more attuned to this style of discourse than others. The site of the British National Health Service review, started in summer 2007, features the “Have Your Say” section, complete with a news and announcements blog that allows for public commentary. The site also incorporated Lord Darzi’s personal blog, online surveys for National Health Service stakeholders and members of the public, and an accompanying YouTube stream (U.K. National Health Service 2008).

Although there remains much empirical work to be done in this area, we can also hypothesize that citizens are more at ease uploading a quickly recorded video delivered in an informal, conversational style than being asked to do so formally and deliberately in a staged setting. Thus, although the egalitarian effects of text-based computer-mediated communication will in some respects diminish, it is not at all clear that audiovisual online culture will have entirely negative effects on citizen engagement. An excellent example here is
Barack Obama's unedited, thirty-seven-minute “More Perfect Union” speech delivered in Philadelphia in March 2008. By Election Day of November 2009, more than 6 million people had viewed the speech on YouTube. But more significant, many citizens chose to upload short films narrating their own personal reactions to it.

A final point about informational exuberance concerns legitimacy and the importance of numbers. Faced with low participation rates, many online democracy initiatives have fallen back on the argument that numbers do not matter and that it is the quality of political deliberation that counts. The best-known formal deliberative schemes have never grown beyond communities of a few hundred and have therefore faced legitimacy problems. Indeed, the reliance by interest organizations on low-threshold form e-mails and web templates that enable many thousands of citizens to send comments to policy makers has been criticized for its cheap-talk effects as the ease of communication may undermine its impact (Shulman 2006).

But should we be so quick to devalue large numbers of citizen actions, even if those actions carry little cost for the individuals who act? Web 2.0 environments enshrine participation by thousands in scalable ways. The most powerful web 2.0 applications – and this is most obvious for online social network sites – derive their value from the predictable network effects associated with large numbers of participants. Most interactions on these sites are low threshold but may involve huge numbers of people. Consider Netmums (http://www.netmum.com), the popular British parenting and health advice community, with 275,000 users (Mayo and Steinberg 2007), or TheStudentRoom (http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk), with its forums containing upward of 19 million messages and (as of October 2009) a nine-thousand-page user-generated wiki covering a wide variety of topics related to higher education.

Political networks in Facebook and Twitter, because they are not tied to a deliberative model, have been able to grow comparatively quickly, and the more people participate, the more value there is in the network. The first signs of this dynamic emerged during the 2004 U.S. presidential primaries, when it became obvious that citizens, often many citizens, were willing to add simple, one-line comments to blog posts. Yet these efforts were utterly eclipsed by Obama’s 2008 campaign. According to Obama’s new media director, Joe Rospars, the campaign raised $500 million from 6.5 million online donations, encouraged four hundred thousand blog posts, regularly e-mailed a database of 13 million Americans, established its own social network (MyBarackObama.com) of two million supporters, and managed to garner the support of a further 5 million members of commercial social networking sites (Rospars 2009). The Pew Internet and American Life Project’s tracking survey on the internet and the U.S. election, conducted before the height of the campaign in April and May 2008, reported that 40 percent of Americans accessed political news and information online and that 46 percent "used the internet, email, or phone texting to get news about the campaigns, share their views, and mobilize others." Some 10 percent of all Americans used social networking sites for political activity – a
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A total of 40 percent of all those who maintain social networking profiles (Smith and Rainie 2008).

Although it has been criticized for its lack of deliberative mechanisms, if judged in terms of the number of participants, the British prime minister’s E-Petitions website, which ran from 2007 to 2010 (when the new Conservative government abandoned it), was one of the most successful e-democracy projects of all time. In its first year, more than twenty-nine thousand petitions were submitted. Accepted petitions attracted 5.8 million signatures from 3.9 million unique e-mail addresses (U.K. Prime Minister’s Office 2008). E-petitions of all kinds have quickly become part of the online repertoire of citizen groups in Britain and the United States, as well as elsewhere, and they have viral characteristics. For example, a 2008 search on Facebook revealed a number of groups formed around specific U.K. e-petitions (Facebook Downing Street E-Petitions 2008).

2.8. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to establish the importance of the hypothesis that innovation in democratic practice is more likely to result when the principles of granularity, informational exuberance, and by-product political learning are embedded in a political communication environment. Nowhere can this hypothesis be more compellingly investigated than in the dynamic complexity of the chaotic transition in which we find ourselves. As ever, the pace of change in the real world of internet-enabled citizen behavior continues to outstrip the pace of change in the academy. Scholars have much to learn from these changes, as do those who seek to bridge the normative-empirical divide in social sciences.

Emphasizing the importance of these principles for democratic innovation does not involve the assumption that citizens lack the motivation to think about and discuss politics. Not only is this assumption empirically disputed (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004) but it is also unnecessary. Most citizens fall into categories along a continuum from motivated to apathetic, and it is highly unlikely that they will remain in one category in perpetuity. Most of us occupy positions between these two extremes, depending on our contexts.

Equally, although they owe much to the web 2.0 wave, these principles are not exclusively dependent on the specific online services that are currently in vogue. The network effects of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are extremely powerful, but these services are likely to evolve or be replaced by others in the future. But it seems safe to assume that the success of these three particular examples means that their foundational rationales will survive in one variant or another. In other words, the internet will continue to provide sources of democratic innovation—and the need for scholarly interrogation—for many years to come. It is not as if things were not interesting enough already. They are about to get even more so.
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