Brave New World? Political participation and new media

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Abstract— **This paper intends to highlight the role played by new social media upon citizens' political participation, their challenges and inequalities, like what has been thoroughly studied for traditional media. New media, also called social networks, like Twitter or Facebook, have been glorified as the universal public sphere, a promising new "café". This paper intends to discuss, in a more realistic and reflexive way, the use of some internet platforms, contradicting the excessive optimism that always arises whenever a new ICT (information and communication technology) emerges. We intend to reposition the social conditions that impact on digital political participations, namely the historical context, the social inequalities and the role of traditional media on political participation. Acknowledging the theoretical proposition stating that political participation (both in real or digital worlds) is stratified, this paper states that there is also a stratification of social media, regarding different levels of uses and goals, and that participation skills needed before social media ever existed are still necessary to participate via new media, an undervalued issue in new media studies. Similarly to other tools, Facebook and Twitter do not change the political situation by themselves. Although this transformation can be enabled by those tools, it all depends on the social, political and historical contexts. Finally, it is recognized that traditional media are also important to make political participation through social networks relevant in the real world.**

Keywords – political participation; new social media; social inequalities

I. INTRODUCTION

When a new technology appears in the field of information and communication, a broaden debate about its democratic potential is inevitable. It happened with the ICTs, the forums, the blogs and it is happening now with the Web 2.0, also designated social media. We face theoretical frameworks with opposite thesis, from optimistic authors, namely Rheingold [1] and Dahlgren [2], who pointed out the transformation of the field of political participation through the use of new technologies, to pessimistic authors, namely Moore [3] and Sunstein [4], who referred that (new) ICTs do not produce significant changes in political participation.

At the empirical evidence level, several researches point out to contradictory results. Thus, within the field of the impacts of (new) ICTs in political participation and democracy it seems that there is a long way to go, either from the theoretical and the empirical point of view. Thus, our contribution intends to discuss in a more realistic way the use of some internet platforms, contradicting the excessive optimism underlying technological deterministic approaches that do not take into account social and power inequalities as well as social and historical environments, both of which contribute to unequal uses of these technologies.

We will focus the analysis upon two levels. First, we will discuss that human societies are structured according to gender, age, income, social and professional category and ethnic group, and we will observe that the interest to participate and the necessary skills for (e-)participation are also unequally distributed. Second, it will be argued that new media are responding to new forms of political participation which are mediated by social and historic environment, clarifying the constraints of these forms of participation in digital environment; also, it shall never be forgotten how traditional media are still decisive to political participation.

II. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: FROM OLD TO NEW SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

A crucial issue in political sociology is the inequalities regarding political participation. Therefore, it would be a paradox if this paper did not approach these inequalities also in the virtual political participation field.

A. Social inequalities in political participation

In western democracies, the recognition of political rights and political equality before the law exist together with a structured social hierarchy around several social factors as: gender, age, income, education, social and professional category, ethnic group, residence and so on [5]. The interest, the sense of duty to participate and the political competences and efficiency are also unequally distributed [6].

For Memmy [7], these inequalities can be found in all political activities, reproducing also in political parties themselves and even within the same socioeconomic group. Verba and Nie's studies [8] in the United States, establishing a relationship between political participation and socioeconomic condition, and Bourdieu's [9] in France, focusing in competences and interest for politics, are very illustrative in this matter.

The researches about political (in)competences are influenced, to a large extent, by the crucial role of education in political involvement, very well explicit in the theoretical proposition "all political practice has a character eminently intellectual, it consists, in most part of cases, in the use of words and concepts" [10]. For the author, the political initiative and practice come from a reduced number of individuals and consists in discourse production and reproduction.

This relationship between political skills and political participation variables implies the definition of scales/kinds of political participation that can go from degree zero – the more simple activities as voting – to more complicated – as writing a discourse or a petition or actively participate in a political organization, being the political activities allocated on the top of the scale more skill demanding than the allocated ones on the basis.

Despite the impact of social inequalities in political participation, it would be simplistic not to list other social factors that may influence political participation and reduce, to a certain extent, the referred inequalities. Among those factors are the valued and conscious belonging to a community, the organization of political systems, the stimuli to participate and the citizenship model (liberal or active).

Some authors – the most optimistic towards new technologies – underestimate or do not even take into account in their researches the crucial issue of political skills regarding political participation. According to their technological deterministic approach, new technologies are just enough to create political involvement.

B. From citizens' political participation inequalities to new media segmentation, according to those divisions

Should the unequal distribution of political participation be mitigated or reinforced by the employment of ICTs? For Dijk [11] there are strong probabilities for the second to occur, albeit this thesis can only be tested through researches carried out for several years. Nevertheless, Dijk's doubts are still very optimistic, as no technology can extinguish any major social inequality.

In the top of the scale rests an active political elite, who uses the more advanced electronic tools to improve their political activity, contributing with ideas and solutions, actively participating in decision-making and using different tools, among other activities. A large agglomerate of people is placed in the bottom of the scale, fitting in the last levels and kinds of political participation, which we can name as "mouse click" participation, i.e., voting in electronic polls, which is seldom reflexive and often immediate (Figure nº 1).

HIGH

OWN INICIATIVE AND ACTION REQUIRED →

Running as a candidate for a seat or office;
Active membership of a political organization;
Writing an opinion text or petition;
Arguing and counter-arguing;
Having a say in a political or social issue;
Mobilizing people;
Voting;
Signing a petition;
Responding to opinion polls
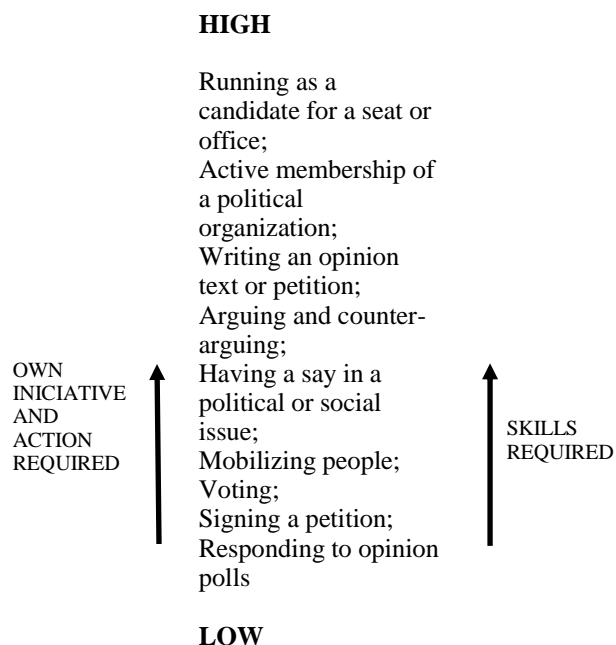
← SKILLS REQUIRED

LOW

Figure 1. Adapted [12]

Below the latter layer, out of the participation scale, there are the actual excluded: those to whom ICTs are not accessible.

A research on digital political participation in Portugal carried out by Simões [13], between 1998 and 2002, confirms and enlarges Dijk's thesis according to the following propositions.

First, digital political participation is socially stratified, like in real world context, allowing, in the case of digital political participation, to highlight added and more selective processes of social filtering.

Second, social differentiation factors, as gender, academic qualifications and professional category filter citizens who participate both in the real world politics and in the digital one. Those factors are also liable for socially

stratified access to ICTs, thus pointing to a double filtering process regarding digital political participation. The distribution of skills to operate electronic devices is also stratified; the skills of those inquired cybercitizens are higher with common tools, decreasing as technological sophistication increases, idea also stated by Breindl [14].

Third, we should not ignore the filters that have been placed before and after, like the attempts to control speech, the surveillance processes and the increasing trend to paid contents, being the first two a significant threat to autonomy, a fundamental basis to the free expression of ideas [15], and the last one a reinforcement of information access inequalities [16].

To each of the differentiated political uses, which kind of electronic tool do cybercitizens use?

The reflection about the online tools chosen for different types and levels of political participation suggests that, in spite of the multifunctional character of some electronic tools, these are, to a large extent, being placed in a hierarchy according to types and levels of political participation.

At the top of the scale there are the e-NGO's, e.g., Avaaz.org – The World in Action. This is actually a political organization, which implies the involvement and mobilization of its members, with its cognitive resources and skills to engage in political participation. Those resources are crucial to create political discourse, to organize and lead struggles at a global scale using a permanently updated website, which is the basis for mobilizing citizens for concrete actions, often with joint organizations for particular deeds, including drafting petitions or letters in order to send them to international organizations or national governments.

Below that, we find the layer of blogs centred in a more systematic, more argumentative and deeper level of political opinion and discussion [17]. These are tools created and used most of the time by skilled individual users, with expertise in producing and reproducing political discourse, being most of these individual initiatives.

Descending the scale, we find Facebook, Twitter and other social media. As seen in several countries and recently in Northern Africa they might have had an important role for mobilizing and organizing social protests [18]. Facebook, as noted before, might be the most multifunctional tool available on the web. Nevertheless, the most predominant political activity on Facebook has been writing short texts mobilizing and organizing social protests. These short texts do not require the same producing and reproducing skills referred above.

Finally, there are online contexts calling only for "mouse-click participation".

III. CITIZENS' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Some theories alert to the elitist character of representative democracy and to the not fulfilled promises or even the paradoxical character of real democracy [19]. Blumler, cited by Bryant [20] argued that political decisions are largely influenced by how they are represented in the media and understood by the public; that politics is presented like a game, undervaluing the substance of politics; that the personalization of politics is enormous, as personal traits are easier to publicize than serious issues or policies; that media promote the increase of negative messages circulation about politics and its actors, thus resulting in the increase of cynicism and the decrease of political information provided to citizens.

Nowadays, there is a significant enthusiasm with the potentialities that new social media can bring to political participation. Likewise the traditional media, old constraints are still held and new ones emerge, and new hopes arise. Some of these questions are to be discussed in the following paragraphs.

A. Social media facing new forms of political participation

The debate over political participation has seen, in the last three decades, two major sets of thought: those who outline the decrease of participation and those who say that only the classical forms of participation suffer from it, rather than new forms of political engagement, which have been increasing [21]. These new forms of political participation quickly emerged in new ICT.

In the contemporary West, fragmented lives lead to an increasing individualism, as traditional institutions liquefied, which created unprecedented individual pursuits [22]. Thus, citizens are called to reinvent new forms of political and civic participation. As Beck [23] referred, citizenship participation became subpolitical, which differs from the political in two aspects: (i) allowing the access to the public sphere to agents outside the political system and (ii) permitting that people are granted access as individuals, not only as members of organizations. The purpose of action might not therefore be a collective struggle, but a personalised form of intervention [24].

Secondly, the purpose of political action is, in large extent, not embedded in a more general, programmatic and long term action, often having a sporadic and very specific character. People engage with small causes, very often particularistic ones (e.g., defending a single woman against being stoned to death instead of defending equal rights to women).

As an example, on March, the 12th, 2011 around 300,000 people – one of the biggest political protests in the Portuguese contemporary history – marched the streets of Lisbon and Oporto answering to an appeal of a 40,000 members' Facebook page. The idea was born and grown within the Facebook community and nurtured by the national televisions. The immediate cause for this manifestation was "discontentment" and each one of those 300,000 people might have had too many different reasons for being "discontent". This believed political engagement was shown only during this manifestation and the aftermath brought nothing of the sort of a political party or even a collective movement. In the general elections held on June of 2011, this movement did not present itself in either real or virtual contexts, it did not come forward with its goals and reasons for discontentment nor did it contribute to the public debate.

Thirdly, the action within political parties is now seen as a falsehood; however, without political mediation the singularisation of the political action ends up denying the very purpose of it [25]. The crucial issue about these new forms of political participation is, in fact, their continuity while the intended goals are not achieved. While new ICTs have the potential to perform classical permanent political roles, the new forms of political participation have the opposite characteristics, namely its sporadic form.

B. New public space?

A long way from the "old" public space, as Habermas conceived it, we live nowadays in a "new hyper-mediated public space" that continues to reconfigure, recompose and "contradict" itself, adapting Dominique Wolton's [26] expression. If the contemporary public space has become undoubtedly larger than the classical by the action of traditional media, emerging social media has broadened it even further.

And yet, as Habermas [27] wrote, the echoing of a cultivated social layer has been long gone in the public use of reasoning; the public has become divided, on the one hand, into expertise minorities which use of reason is not public, and another in the great mass of consumers. It should be recognized that the public space has become plural and heterogeneous (Habermas himself recognized it); and that it has been long since the spatial structures of communication are convulsing, as Keane [28] wrote, assisting the dilution of ancient hegemony of public life (limited by territory, structured by the state, mediated only by conventional media). The conventional ideals of a unified public space where citizens struggle for a public cause lead to the overlapping and interconnection of several public spaces.

In this context where public space becomes increasingly fragmented, "virtual communities" have been emerging and strengthening themselves on a daily basis, which can be observed looking to social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. New arenas that, some authors say, have been crucial to the "staging" of mobilizing people to decisive political actions like the ones staged in Northern Africa on February and March 2011.

In this section, this approach intends to confront the dominant excessive optimism with a more realistic analysis of the political participation through social media.

Weblogs have been on the rise as political media for the last decade, but these tools also show the inequalities discussed before. While some bloggers produce highly elaborated discourses, arguing and counter-arguing, most political blog users are just readers or produce nothing more than simplistic and short comments or confidences, which often are not even argumentative.

On the other hand, there might be a reconfiguration of the public sphere as we find a wider interaction between blogs and traditional media. Some recent news have been brought up firstly in the blogosphere (in Portugal, the minor political issue about the Prime Minister's university degree was first discussed within the political blogs); on the other way, the daily discussion on the blogs is centered mainly upon the printed (or published on the web) stories of the traditional media.

Moreover, although the newer social media are in the spotlight, the highly optimistic approaches should not be overrated and may even be criticized as they are somewhat a-historical: most of them try to understand the importance of social networking without considering the social and political history of those using the technology, as well as the profiles of users and those on the leading roles. They also tend to be a-cultural, disregarding the cultural traits of the societies where these new media platforms are being used. Facebook is new in combining several online possibilities, but those who use it are still social and cultural beings, thus making its content a mirror of their representations. This critique regards carefully the political participation in its wider meaning via social networks.

History has shown people uprising against tyrants or undesired social conditions, whether in pre-industrial France, in industrial England or in post-industrial Czechoslovakia, all of which happened before internet. Even the Tiananmen riots, albeit the use of fax and Xerox machines, were mainly set up with face-to-face interaction. The fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, had a technology push, as the incidents were started with a televised declaration (by mistake, we understood later), but the people went out of their homes in a completely unorganised way.

We are yet to know exactly how the Egyptian and the Tunisian mobs were organized. But we do know that the major feeders on Tweeter and Facebook were "old" bloggers, protesting against Mubarak regime since back in 2004. The ties between these bloggers might have been stronger than just a Facebook click. If we are to stress the role of online tools, we should regard all of them. The Internet penetration rate in Egypt doesn't surpass 25% [29] and the Facebook users are merely 7.7% of its entire population [30]. People would not take serious risks if they were not committed to each other. Besides, we should not underestimate the involvement of labour unions in these insurrections in Northern Africa.

Social networks provide weak ties between people, as they do not have to seriously engage in any question they are asked to. Facebook has a multiple set of interactive possibilities, but it was not designed with any political aim. Most of the interaction on Facebook is personal and recreational, and the political possibilities of Facebook or Twitter are similar of those presented by blogs, forums or e-mails. "These established social networking sites are not major hotbeds of political activity" [31].

There are also some signs of dissonant attitudes between public opinion, civic participation or electoral behaviour and online political expressions. Certainly, these new media platforms amplify the visibility of one cause, but they do not necessarily make people engage in real causes in the real world. The Facebook page Save Darfur Coalition has almost 1.5 million "friends". And yet, the average amount of money donated to help the refugees in South Sudan was nine cents of dollar [32]. The optimistic view about political participation via new social media must be toned down with the knowledge that online participation does not mean real

participation, and politics still is a real-world activity [33]. The click of one button is much simpler than protesting on the streets, especially if state powers (police, armed forces) are to impose some violence on the protesters, or even if the action might bring any kind of personal cost.

As another example, in the Portuguese presidential election of 2011, a company made a content analysis study of the internet platforms, to understand what the internet users were saying about all the candidates. Using "Prophesee", the researchers analysed the amount and content of the online dialogue for the electoral campaign period. Fernando Nobre, who came third on the actual ballot, was the candidate with the highest positive feelings towards him and the one with the biggest digital "buzz" of those weeks. He also was "elected" as the Facebook president, as he had 38,584 "likes" opposing Cavaco Silva, the candidate who actually won the election, who only had 28,964 [34].

Anyway, although losing in the digital field, the elected president used as much as eight different platforms during his campaign. These new media, such as Facebook, can up being used as publicity platforms to conventional politics, as they are used almost only during election campaigns or combined with the "old" media that still set the news agenda.

The online social networks provide their members the information about so many civil and political actions at the same time that if they are not filtered by any other medium (usually newspapers or television), the myriad of information and political causes can undermine the ability to significantly adhere to any of them. "The growth and broader dissemination of knowledge paradoxically produces greater uncertainty and contingency rather than providing a resolution of disagreements or the basis for a more effective domination by central societal institutions" [35].

It seems that the outcome of political activities depend, to a large extent, upon the articulation between new social media and traditional ones. On the one hand, these new social media can be used to express opinions, mobilize and organize people for action. They have higher mobilization abilities, as they do not have time and space constraints and are at better odds to faster organize political actions. Thus, new social media introduce some changes in political activity. But, on the other hand, traditional media recount and give visibility to what is happening in the realm of social networks. Hence, traditional media give real existence to new social media.

IV. FINAL REFLECTIONS

The "newer" new media, alike other media and technologies that created similar expectations did not solve "old" social problems. Those new media have been challenging the seductive image of digital citizens who, regardless of their social condition, would be able to use the powerful technological resources, turning them into autonomous citizens, politically active and systematically controlling their political representatives' activities. Therefore, they might not fulfill the democratization and the massification previously promised.

Like political participation in the real world, digital political participation implies political skills. These are also socially stratified, attending to a double filtering process: the same social factors which determine a stratified political participation also promote a stratified use of the ICTs. This stratification is also reinforced by inequalities registered at computer literacy level and by all-pervading inequalities of power.

Our opinion is that these kinds of stratification have lead to the construction of a hierarchy of the different media, according to the different kinds and levels of participation, i.e., some being used more for simpler forms and other to more complex forms of political participation, both being capable of obtaining different levels of efficiency. We do not forget that the participation skills needed before the appearance of the new media are still necessary to participate via new media, which reflexes the frailty of the idea of a brave new world.

And yet, we address traditional media still showing their importance, turning real what happens in the virtual world, revealing much of what is generated in the new media, keeping, at a large extent, their traditional agenda-setting function. The traditional media keep their agenda setting power intact, not only in their own means (printed or broadcasted), but also in the social networks, where those can influence the stories being discussed.

The interconnection between traditional and new media news agendas may indicate we are facing a reconfiguration of the public space rather than the creation of an entirely new one. This reconfiguration might be of interest to further investigations.

Given the recent nature of social manifestations emerging from new media, deeper and more empirical investigations are the next step needed to understand the social context and the goals of these ICTs, the social consequences of their use, the sustainability of online initiatives regarding the reach of the established objectives, separating what is perennial from what is ephemeral; finally it would be useful to create a typology of "participation profiles" that contemplated the multifaceted and more complex nature emerging from these new contexts, helping us repositioning the political participation concept.

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