Preface

(R)EVOLVING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, (R)EVOLVING SOCIAL MEDIA

Developments in technological communication have always played an important role in the way political actors communicate with citizens, other holders of social power, and among themselves. Whether it is a matter of utility or image selling, in the last two decades, the convergence of political and media logics by political parties has been increasingly articulated online because of social differentiation and the transformations in communication. This move online has had various and contradictory implications for political life, which reflect a shift in the overall style of political communication to an aggressive, continuous, and individualized mode. The move has strengthened what Alfred Hermida would call the “ambient” character of the awareness of political actors, the mass media, and the public, which implies the restructuring of power relations and the increasing centralization of power. By bringing together theoretical and empirical explorations in different political contexts and traditions, this edited volume reveals the complexities of societal, cultural, organizational, and individual articulations of contemporary technology in the connections between politics and communication with respect to social media and their global and local trajectories.

Many critical communication scholars, most notably Raymond Williams, have indicated that despite their revolutionary and emancipatory potential for changing social communication, throughout history technological innovations have been subordinated to the interests of holders of political and economic power and their attempts to preserve their privileges and certain course of social progress. Nevertheless, in the last century or so, political actors have differed in their motivations for the early adoption of new technologies, such as radio, television, and the Internet, as well as their implementations in routine representations of political power and actions. Technological innovations may have been introduced when technologically reductionist perceptions prevailed that the job could be done “cheaper and faster” and achieve predictable and positive outcomes. However, the reasons for the introduction of technological innovations tend to be much more prosaic, resting on the symbolic significance of adopting new technologies. A variety of actors want to prove that they are modern, relevant, up-to-date, and in line with their competition. Although this hypothesis has been widely confirmed in political actors that gain a foothold in cyberspace across different contexts, the jury is still out with regard to social media.

This bandwagon effect came under severe criticism in the case of marginal political actors who devised a clear rationale for their appropriation of new technologies. Because of their inferior resource capacity and very limited exposure in traditional media outlets, this type of political actor began to perceive information and communication technologies not as a mere technological utility but as a “game-changer.” The manner and intensity of using new technologies are the basis of the equalization
theory, which encapsulates the effects of the utopian wave of discussions on the impact of information and communication technologies in the political process. This wave examined ambitions for direct democracy, new opportunities for empowerment, the revitalization of democracy, participatory politics, the activation of an increasingly disaffected electorate, and a new, equanimous platform for political competition among political actors. Hence, the utopians claimed that the move online would challenge existing power structures and introduce a distinct type of political engagement that sharply differed from traditional activities.

Contrary to utopian aspirations, a second wave of skeptical cyber-realists has voiced doubts about the revolutionary effects of the move online on the political process and put forward the concept of “politics as usual” coined by Michael Margolis and David Resnick. They probably have made the strongest case for the normalization hypothesis by rejecting revolutionary conduct in politics and stressing that the Internet tends to reflect and reinforce behavioral patterns in the real world. This “no-change” scenario simply reflects the view that politics online are an extension of offline politics. According to normalization theorists, the utopian hopes of a new politics that would emerge in the computer era and revitalize citizenship and democracy have been shattered by ordinary politics and commercial activity, which have invaded and captured cyberspace. A sophisticated political economy has begun to dominate political, economic, social, and recreational life on the Internet. Despite the evidence of the validity of this line of thought, the emergence of social media calls for a re-examination of its relevance, preferably from a transnational comparative perspective.

Social media comprise interrelated, omnipresent, and “always-on” communication environments, thus creating different kinds of connections for actors in the political arena. Studies conducted in different countries have demonstrated the emergence of social media as ambient communication spaces where politicians and their parties are in continuous, asynchronous dialogue with their political competitors, the media, and the electorate. In this sense, various agents engage in networked co-constructions of the political arena where political actors seek power through a diverse and apparently shared communication space. From a historical perspective, the societal conditions that would allow the entry into and participation within the political sphere have never fully materialized because of the unequal access to the media, which is affected by ownership and decision-making, the uneven distribution of communication competences, and the hegemony of the opinions and positions of the powerful. Although many scholarly findings have indicated the revolutionary potential of social media, there is emerging evidence of their normalization as tools for both narrow political struggles and new evolutionary paths of political communication towards an inclusive, multi-layered, and multi-directional social phenomenon.

When we first discussed the idea of putting together a volume on the (r)evolutionary potentials of social media for political communication, we were met with a crossfire of questions: In considering the possibilities and constraints of dynamic and shared engagement in communication, can we speak about the dominant modes of political communication on social media in general? How have social media affected political communication and to what extent are the existing offline power positions mirrored in this ambient communication environment? What are the communalities and particularities of articulations between social, politics, and media across societies? Keeping in mind the challenges of setting boundaries between the different political roles of actors engaged in social media, how does they affect the prevailing modes of governmental communication, public relations, journalism, and entertainment? As the editors of this book, we have aimed to include authors from various political contexts and traditions in order to
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develop a volume that would explore the contingent connections between political communication and social media as they are developed or broken in particular political and social contexts and as they are manifested in different ways across the globe.

Instead of attempting to answer the questions posed above, the studies included in this volume confirm that they are relevant across various empirical contexts and analytical perspectives. In this sense, by drawing on different theoretical concepts, adopting various methods, and focusing on a broad range of research problems, the studies included here indicate various relations of dominance and subordination in connoting, symbolizing, and evoking the prevailing context-related conceptions of political communication that shape the online character of contemporary political life. More precisely, the book is structured according to four perspectives on the complex world of (r)evolutionary changes in political communication through social media: complex (re)articulations of political life; grassroots social movements, institutionalized politics, and mediatized political communication; strategic communication of mainstream political actors on micro-blogging outlets; and utilization of Facebook as a strategic election campaign tool.

COMPLEX (RE)ARTICULATIONS OF POLITICAL LIFE

The perspective of the authors in the first section of the volume is the broadest because they tackle broad aspects of political life and their articulation through social media. The chapters in this section encompass different approaches to the political dynamics tied to the emancipatory possibilities of social media technology and the particular linkages forged between social structures and agents. These complex connections in political life, which are articulated through social media as market-driven communication technologies, appear to be formed between the participatory promises of bringing people together bothmeaningfully and equally, enabling them to exchange opinions and act for the particular purposes and larger realities of the coercive character of contemporary surveillance societies. In this context, social media emerge as always-active communication environments where the capacities of political actions are limited by the interests and actions of political and corporate power holders. The chapters in this section indicate that vibrant spheres provide grounds for the reproduction of historically persistent processes of preserving social order and retaining established relations in political life. They also describe political and cultural contexts frameworks for the formation of particular spaces of public reasoning, cooperation, and identity formation, which are without precedence in the history of political communication.

By placing their analyses in the political context of the United States, in the first chapter, Ramona Sue McNeal and Justin W. Holmes evaluate competing claims about whether the proliferation of social media exacerbates or attenuates polarization in the political evaluations of the electorate. Contrary to the authors’ initial expectations, they found that social media use appears to attenuate rather than exacerbate polarization. Although the evidence suggests that consistent ideologies have been developed with extreme stances on issues, negative attitudes towards cooperation, and dislike of political opponents, the hollowing out of the political middle, and the rise of a confrontational style of politics, McNeal and Holmes argue that social media use appears to have emerged as a modest corrective of these phenomena.

In the second chapter, Shaohai Jiang discusses whether microblogs embody basic characteristics of the Habermasian public sphere and analyses opinions about the “Snowden affair” expressed on the social
networking site Twitter and its Chinese counterpart Sina Weibo. By focusing on the case of Edward Snowden, the former CIA employee who leaked classified data on the surveillance technologies and practices of the National Security Agency, the author suggests that these similar social media networks in different political contexts are public spaces that offer wide-reaching possibilities for information diffusion and gathering as well as opinion exchange and debate. However, their limitations as integral parts of what resembles Yochai Benkler’s notion of the networked public sphere seem to be shaped by the inclusive and exclusive agencies of the political establishment online, which appear appearing more explicit in China and more implicit in the United States.

Pantelis Vatikiotis critically reconsiders the role of social media, particularly Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr, in the mobilization and transformative capacities of contemporary protest movements. His study focuses on the “Arab Spring” in late 2010, the Occupy Movements that exposed and countered the logics of global financial capitalism in 2011, and movements against the established political and economic order throughout Europe in the present decade. The author concludes that contemporary social movements and their mediated activities are multifaceted in character and suggests that in order to grasp the complexities of the interplay between social and media activism, it is necessary to probe the dialectical relationship between structures and agents, by critically (re)considering mechanisms and contradictions in the interweaving of contentious social (media) practices.

**GRASSROOTS SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, INSTITUTIONALIZED POLITICS, AND MEDIATIZED POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

The second section includes studies conducted from the perspective of the dynamic relationships between grassroots social movements and institutionalized politics in the context of social media communication. These dynamics are considered with respect to the complex process of the institutionalization of initially loose political groupings that communicate particular issues and propagate social change through social and mainstream media. The dynamics are explored in the often conflictual mediat(iz)ed relationships of social movements with the political powerhouses that form governments or institutionalized political opponents. The chapters in this section consider the articulations between interrelated social movements and the troubles they face. These articulations are manifested in the discrepancies between online communications in both social media and offline actions, conflicts with institutionalized politics, temptations to take coercive measures against the attempts of movements to mobilize citizens through social media, and the prospects of concrete political effects. They are also manifest in tensions between political ideals, flattened hierarchies, inclusive decision-making on the one hand and political pragmatism during the process of institutionalization of movements on the other hand. Hence, social media do not simply move in and revolutionize the dynamics of grassroots social movements, institutionalized politics, and mediat(iz)ed political communication, but they appear as an additional public arenas for the contestation of political ideas, developments, visibility, the mobilization of social groups, and spaces for (re)articulations of established power relations.

In the fourth chapter, Lazaro M. Bacallao-Pino examines the radical online political communication of a grassroots movement that emerged on and spread through social media. This author focuses on the university student movement #YoSoy132 during the general election campaign in Mexico in 2012. By investigating the interrelationships between online communication and offline collective action,
Parliamentary social for social awareness communication. Others on influence Twitter sphere. In this context, the author, on the one hand, argues that Twitter makes an important contribution to inclusive political processes because it diversifies the notion of political communication. On the other hand, Gessler suggests that the Turkish political establishment took coercive actions to limit online public communication in order to protect its authority against potential citizen unrest.

Marta Pérez Escolar investigates the political communication by the leftist political party, Podemos, which emerged from the 15M movement on social media. The party aims to rearrange the power divide in Spain. Escolar focuses on the party’s activities on social media two months before the European Parliamentary Elections in 2014. Her findings suggest that the social media activities of Podemos can be regarded as heterogeneous and pluralistic, resting on the idea of the “wisdom crowd.” Although the party represents itself as democratically inclusive, it neglects the pragmatic character of the contemporary struggles of institutionalized politics.

**STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION OF POLITICAL ACTORS ON MICRO-BLOGGING OUTLETS AND ITS ABILITY TO EMPOWER DEMOCRACY**

The social media outlets collectively described as Web 2.0 increasingly have influenced the way individuals communicate and facilitate their involvement in observing, commenting, filtering, and distributing different social actions. The expansion of social media also has contributed to the significant modernization of political communication because new outlets allow for direct communication to and with wide audiences, thus bypassing the mass media and their influence on the communication of political messages to voters. For example, Twitter allow the instant dissemination of short messages from variety of sources and provides a platform that permits the ad hoc formation of public discussions and the rapid emergence of politically engaged publics. Political actors try to capitalize on the new opportunities Twitter offers, some by devising new campaign strategies, such as informing, mobilizing, fundraising, and persuading. Others take advantage of Twitter because in political battles no one wants to be portrayed as out-of-date. However, this may have a profound effect on the quality of political discussion, also due to its peculiar awareness system. The following chapters tackle questions related to the nature of political communication, the use of Twitter a channel of strategic communication, the rationale for the presence of Twitter, as well as the influence of Twitter on political communication in the public sphere.

In their chapter on political communication and Twitter in Greece, Stamatis Poulakidakos and Anastasia Veneti explore the political communication literature to examine the revisited “bandwagon” hypothesis and discuss potential enhancements of the political process because of technological advancements in an idiosyncratic political context. In their quest to answer the question of whether the increased use of information and communication technology has revitalized Greek democracy by fostering political participation and conversation, the authors focus on the potential of microblogging to animate political communication and provide a new repertoire of political action. Because Twitter appears to circumvent
the biased mainstream media, particularly in environments, such as Greece, where Twitter has a rapidly
growing audience, Poulakidakos and Veneti conduct content and thematic analyses of the tweets by two
main political parties (New Democracy and Syriza). In the context of this heated political environment,
which is marked by the increasing polarization of the public sphere, the authors seek to determine whether
Twitter positively contributes to public discussions, promotes the exchange of rational argumentation
about the crisis, and serves as a new, immaterial public space. The authors’ answers to these questions
are in line with the normalization hypothesis put forward by Margolis and Resnick (2000). Not much has
changed in the old ways of communicating politics in Greece; neither the politicians nor the public exploit
the potential of Twitter, instead maintaining perpetual parallel monologues. The prevailing modality of
tweeting is broadcasting rather than responding or engaging in conversation, and personalized postings
are virtually absent. In addition to identifying the propagandistic methods of communication used by
the rivals of the main party, the authors conclude that technological innovation is only a precondition
for a revolutionizing shift in political discourse and inevitably rests on the willingness and the capacity
of its main carriers (i.e., political parties) to achieve a complete change.

In the following chapter, Maria Francesca Murru acknowledges that Twitter is not only one of many
communication tools but also a communicative event that drives political actors to be represented through
a new form of storytelling comprised of infographics, visual resources, and metrics. Focusing on its
distinct architecture, Maria Francesca Murru analyzes the performative role of Twitter hashtags in the
 politicization of Europe in the 2014 European Parliamentary (EP) elections. Recognizing Twitter as a
manifestation of the public sphere, the author analyzes the Italian EP election debate on Twitter and
observes the negotiation of meaning within the specific grammar of the micro-blogging platform and its
connection to the ongoing politicization of the European Union (EU) within and across national politics.
Aiming to contribute to the accumulated knowledge about the social and political value of Twitter, Murru
attempts to explore and explain the relationships that connect Twitter to the wide-ranging discursive
practices through which topics of common interest are framed and made visible. In order to address
the hashtags as triggers of affiliative and value-laden spaces of discourse whereby meanings and stances can
be negotiated, the author utilizes an ethnographic approach to study the dynamics of affiliation, which
resides in the mutual implications of the content and context of events on Twitter. Murro’s analysis of
hashtags—linguistic markers that call for affiliation and open a space of shared attention—reveals that
Twitter effectively acted as a forum of the public sphere because it offered a polyphonic stage for the
competitive claims-making process that brought Europe into the arena of public debate. This process
has illuminated the connections that link Twitter to other forums of the public sphere because it incor-
porated already existing content, symbols, and facts in its streams of affiliation, and it utilized Twitter
as a sounding board rather than an autonomous public sphericule.

In chapter 9, Alem Maksuti and Tomaž Deželan observe the dynamics of the political communi-
cation of political actors that compete in a primary electoral race rather than in a second-order electoral
arena. As a social media outlet revered by politicians, journalists, and opinion makers, Twitter offered an
excellent opportunity to observe the intensity and innovation in the use of Twitter by Slovenian political
powerhouses in an important electoral battle. The study builds on the accumulated evidence that con-
firms Twitter as an integrative element in Slovenian party campaign strategies. It was used in political
interactions with journalists and opinion makers, and it constituted a “hit-or-miss” political battlefield
because of its inadequate professionalization. Maksuti and Deželan examine the intensity of campaign ing
on Twitter to investigate its centrality in contemporary election campaigns conducted in Slovenia. The
authors also revisit the campaign intensity hypothesis of political communication, message timing, the
tactic dimension, as well as the relevance of the copycat theory of party web campaigning. By conducting a content analysis of the tweets posted by the relevant political actors during the 2014 national election campaign, the authors reaffirm the claim that it is primarily up to political actors to embrace the full potential of technological innovation. They also affirm that they have utilized these tools conservatively and selectively. The study also clearly demonstrates that the Twitter strategies used by Slovenian political parties are drawn from mainstream toolboxes (e.g., TV), acknowledging the principles related to campaign intensity and recency. The authors contend that Twitter campaigning in Slovenia is bound to theories of effective campaign strategies and fundamental theories of political psychology and voting behaviour. Thus, campaigning on this outlet is one of the most central and strategically effective arenas of communicating political messages.

**UTILIZATION OF FACEBOOK AS A STRATEGIC ELECTION CAMPAIGN TOOL**

The users of social media encompass almost a third of humankind. With more than a billion active users, Facebook has the largest share of the political communication market. The failure to take advantage of this opportunity would be suicidal for political actors. Similar to the advent of the Internet, more relevant than the question of going on Web 2.0 is the dilemma of what to do with it. The use of this tool does not require in-depth literacy. The preferences of voters indicate that politicians frequently mimic their presence on Web 2.0 and experiment with its unprecedented potential. However, certain actors, either those suffering from structural deficiencies in the offline world (revolution hypothesis) or those with structural advantages offline but want to maintain an edge online as well (normalization hypothesis) have taken an active role in exploiting the potential of social media rather than just jumping on-board. These actors have attempted to use Facebook as a strategic tool of political communication and have utilized it to inform, engage, mobilize, interact, as well as agenda building and strategic visual planning. The chapters in the last section of this volume examine how and to the degree to which these strategies have materialized during key electoral races.

Focusing on comparatively under-explored social media outlet in the political communication literature, Lucia Vesnic-Alujević investigates aspects of political communication on Facebook in case of second-order EP elections, which attract modest attention of voters and media from their introduction in 1979. Focusing on a market comprising nearly 200 million users, Vesnić-Alujević draws on the concept of deliberative democracy to explore citizens’ interactions with politicians and their support of political deliberation. In her evaluation of the potential of Facebook as a tool in election campaigns, especially its utilization in political communication, the author concentrates on the uses of Facebook in the EP campaigns of 2009 and 2014. She identifies the most active actors, the dominant modes of communication, and the interaction between political actors and their audience. By analyzing Facebook posts, she identifies the increased professionalism of the political communication in 2014, which had far less informative content, more engaging material, and clearer strategies of targeting specific groups. She argues that Facebook has become a mainstream electoral campaign medium, with abundant audiovisual content and hyperlinks. However, because it lacks mobilizing and interactive content, Facebook is still a medium for informing rather than persuading voters. Vesnic-Alujevic concludes that Facebook still plays the role of a complementary campaign tool, and even though there is great potential for deliberation and interaction through Facebook, this outlet has not been exploited adequately by political parties. There is an absence of rational discussion leading to political deliberation and virtually no interaction.
between political parties and sympathizers. Vesnic-Alujevic’s perspective on the limits of technological advancements and the dangers of technological determinism is similar to that of Poulakidakos and Venet as well as many others in this volume.

In a similar study of electoral dynamics across the ocean, Ashik Shafi and Fred Vultee analyze the Facebook posts of presidential candidates in the 2012 federal election in the United States. The authors examine the Facebook posts of Mitt Romney and Barack Obama during the election campaign. They analyze the content and rhetorical features of these posts to identify the strategies of using the Facebook social media outlet to reach both the mass media and the public instantly, thus making it a tool for agenda building. Shafi and Vultee are primarily interested in whether politicians fully exploit Facebook to influence the public and the mass media on an unprecedented scale. Their findings suggest that Facebook was used as a platform to organize like-minded voters. Similar to Vesnic-Alujevic’s findings on the EP elections, Facebook was used to demonstrate political presence and inform voters rather than engage in political discussions. The authors also argue that the candidates used Facebook to convey personality, appeal to the audience, engage in cyber-rallying, and organize supporters. Based on their findings, Shafik and Vultee suggest that Facebook was utilized as a strategic public relations tool rather than an information source. Thus, they failed to detect efforts by Obama and Romney to use this social media outlet to influence agenda building.

Camelia Cmeciu demonstrates another use of Facebook as a strategic campaign tool. By focusing on the visual self-presentation of candidates on Facebook during the 2014 EP elections in Romania, Cmeciu explores the presence of the winning and losing Romanian candidates who stood for the 2014 EP elections. By taking into account the relevance of Facebook’s photo imagery, the author acknowledges the visual nature of contemporary elections and the potential of images to frame politicians as social actors that perform different actions. Cmeciu also investigates politicians’ timelines on Facebook’s to gather evidence of their strategic use of visual discourse. In addition to levels of strategic visual planning, Cmeciu analyzes the Facebook timelines of Romanian political actors to identify the predominant themes and master frames. This visual framing analysis indicates that the winning politicians tended to be promoted visually as political leaders surrounded by an impressive campaign entourage, whereas the losers were framed as populist campaigners in the midst of large audiences or as compassionate candidates interacting with individuals. Cmeciu also identifies the prevalence of hybrid messages that focused on national contexts instead of the EU political arena, which showed candidates surrounded by national-level supporters and themes instead of those pertaining to Europe. By arguing that online visibility does not trigger the offline mobilization of voters, Cmeciu reiterates an assertion expressed throughout the chapters presented in this volume: Social media have not revolutionized political communication and not revitalized democracy.