

# Social Media and the Civic Sphere: Crisis, Critique and the Future of Democracy

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# 1. Overview: evidence, debates, lessons

## **In a time of crises...**

- Political economic, societal, environmental...
- The stakes are high
- The future of democracy itself cannot be taken for granted
- It continues to make gains in some places where it has been weak or even non-existent
- Yet is threatened in many fronts, not least in the West

## The democratic value-added of social media?

- By now nobody harbours any illusions that ICT can 'save democracy'
- Yet most agree it be foolish to dismiss ICT generally and social media in particular as insignificant
- Extreme positions rejected, yet much debate on those in between

# The bad news about the web

- Web shaped by economic power of small number of dominant companies
- Massive accumulation and selling of our net behavior
- Architecture and link logic privilege small group of popular websites
- Traffic to political websites; about .1%
- Of the 773,000 political sites, 50 received 41% of that traffic
- Professionalization of the blogosphere: the top 10 sites (US) attract half the traffic
- Etcetera...

## Some lessons

- The web does not really broaden political discourse on a society-wide level
- Alternative digital public spheres: an archipelago of networks, movements, some overlap
- Most political users are already committed activists
- Failures : more due to soc-cult-pol rather than media
- Although their character and attributes are far from insignificant!
- Social media increasingly a part of the technologies of control....

## HOWEVER, having said all that...

- We still avoid the extreme pessimism
- Social media CAN still play a useful role for democracy
- They can function to formulate and express opinion,
- Help develop and unify collective identities, mobilise, coordinate, inform, inspire, etc.
- But under specific circumstances; context important (will return to this); keep the limitations in view



## 2. Probing critical research approaches

### Critical roots

- Kant: on the conditions and limits of our (self-)knowledge
- Hegel: on unnecessary constraints on freedom.
- Thus: epistemological and normative/power dimensions:
  - a “Hegelian” critique implies have dealt with “Kantian” one
- Critical tasks: dealing with discrepancies: appearances and ‘deeper realities’
- The Kantian critique: promotes self-reflection, to avoid “epistemological arrogance”

# Critical orientations

- The three great modern masters of suspicion (Ricoeur):
- Marx: 'political economy', Freud: 'the unconscious', Nietzsche 'knowledge'
- Add: 'language/meaning' (late Wittgenstein, Saussure)
- 'Gender' (feminism)...
- Also: ethnicity, post-colonial, sexual orientation, technology....
- To question what/how we know, to challenge/destabilise hegemonies (Kant + Hegel/Marx)



## Lineages and crossovers

- Marx: many strands; Gramsci, Frankfurt-Habermas, Althusser, etc. (skipping Soviet-style dialectical-materialism)
- Freud: many splits; Lacan, Žižek; identity, subjectivity
- Nietzsche: Foucault... Laclau/Mouffe
- Language/semiotics: Barthes, Derrida; discourse analysis
- Feminism, queer theory.. Butler...
- Cultural Studies; Boltanski's post-Bourdieu critical sociology
- Much cross-fertilisation; critical research builds on important roots, develops many branches

# Resurgence: prismatic critical angles

- The reality of contemporary capitalism is fundamental
- To deal critically with capitalism: zero in on pol econ and class
- Yet, class not the subjective flashpoint of most political engagement
- Class – objective and subjective; other forms of domination...
- Culture, discourses, meaning, identity/subject positions
- Speaking as a self-confessed, “lapsed, eclectic revisionist”...😊

# Media, communication, information studies

- A number of traditions of explicitly critical media research
- Since 1970's, continually evolving: (cf: today's ICTs and Soc)
- The differences: we need to discuss, compare and debate – up to a point.
- Highlight complementary nature of various positions.
- Full consensus not possible (or desirable); always some incommensurability
- Let's avoid excessive intra-battles; memories from the 1970's and 1990's... .

# Critique as method and moment

- Critique as a moment, a phase of research
- ‘Suspicion’; reflection on power relations;
- Illuminating them and how/why they are legitimated, obscured,, and so on
- But also: on the conditions of our own knowledge, which is always predicated on particular circumstances...(Kant)
- Always contextualise!
- The centrality of contingency: shapes phenomena

# The limits of critique; critical beyond critique

- Today, the concept of critique seems to have lost its punch
- Decline of Left, neoliberalism, postmodern ironic sensibilities..
- Also: no clear pol alternative to galvanise heterogeneous opposition.
- Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983): we can see the deceptions – but so what?
- Contemporary cynicism blunts power of critique
- Daily flow of critical revelations: feelings of disempowerment
- Perhaps need less 'critique' and more critical efforts to find ways forward, engender hope and practices

### 3. Approaching social media

#### Staking out the terrain (continuous updating!)

- Social networks: people can generate personal web pages; Facebook
- Blogs: online journals; purposes, content, duration, impact vary enormously.
- Content networks: organise and share, legally and non-legally; YouTube.
- Wikis: people add and modify content collectively; Wikipedia
- Forums: for online discussion, specific topics and interests.
- Microblogging: small scale content, online and via mobile phones; Twitter
- Podcasts: Spotify, iTunes
- Gaming, etc.



# The social worlds of social media

- Online social life: the web environment
- The 'parallel universe': more people spend more of their time there
- On-offline connections; as researchers, we follow the media and the people
- Distinctive features, implications for how we communicate, etc.
- Meanings generated/fixed, discourses embedded, practices engendered
- Fast-moving and shifting target!

# Social media as civic spheres

- My angle: civic spheres, i.e., (creating) sites of political participation
- Being selective; spotting the political...
- NB: we are dealing with popular modes of experience
- Must tune into specific web-based cultures and atmospheres (e.g, LOL)
- Tracing the connections: online, offline, larger societal settings
- Facebook, Twitter: from Cairo to Moscow, Wall Street to Vellinge

## 4. Paths and procedures

### Discursive production of subjectivity

- Much of pol econ system geared to ‘producing subjectivity’
- Shaping identities, desires, values, attitudes
- A massive terrain that that critical research can sink its teeth into...
- Power works in subtle and elusive ways... meanings, definitions, discourses
- Prevailing /hegemonic discourses – *on the web, about the web*
- For ex: consumerist individualism and/orc ommodified participation, posing as “democratic”

# Using the critical toolbox

- Highlighting and backgrounding
- Contingencies; pol econ: the basic backdrop
- Technology and attributes of architecture
- Contexts, events: history in the moment
- Specifying key discourses, nodal points, and meanings
- 'Participation', 'knowledge', 'truth': view with suspicion
- Not least: self-knowledge, experience: the sneaky unconscious... our own inner contradictions
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# Confronting ideological mechanisms

- The 'producer' aspect is central – people doing (creative) things...
- ...that can both reinforce as well as challenge hegemonies
- Subject positions: as producer-, consumer-, and civic agents
- Subjectivities are never fully stable or fixed – always over-determined
- Highlight tensions, contradictions, in discursive strategies and practices
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## No end point – for democracy or for critical intervention...

- Analyses of ‘hegemonic recuperation’
- The empire always strikes back: ‘ideological repair’
- Continual analytic looping back to social, political, cultural contexts