

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN AN AGE OF MEDIATISATION

TOWARDS A NEW  
RESEARCH AGENDA

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## Abstract

The media landscape and its societal significance is in rapid transition; likewise basic features of democracy are changing. In this article we pursue these two strands in order to sketch the background to a need for a new research agenda, as well as to arrive at proposals regarding the directions that such research can take. In regard to democracy our emphasis is on the dimension of participation, while the developments in the media we capture with the term mediatisation, which signals not only the ubiquity of media but also the processes by which society increasingly adapts itself to media logics. The first section takes up political engagement and situates it within the changing character of democracy. The second section is focused on the media and dynamics of mediatisation, underscoring their significance for democratic participation. In the third section we provide the foundations for a research agenda on mediatisation and democratic participation.

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## Introduction

This article derives from the ESF Forward Look programme concerning a new research agenda for media studies; it can be seen as one of several different background texts that helped prepare the programme's final report. The focus here is on the relationship between two key areas of concern in the modern world: democratic participation and mediatisation. Both are complex in their own right, and their intersection is all the more complicated. Yet to understand the conditions of contemporary democracy and to develop policies that can enhance civic participation in ways that connect with mediatisation require us to grasp as clearly as possible these two fields and how they relate to each other. In our discussion we will review some key research in both areas, highlighting what we know and what we do not know – or what we do not know well enough.

The first section introduces the notions of political engagement and situates it within the current state of democracy. The second section addresses the media and processes of mediatisation – and their relevance for democratic participation. In the third section, set against this background, we offer some proposals for research in the coming years.

## Participation and Democracy

### Participation and Democracy's Dilemmas

The notion of participation lies at the heart of democracy; that citizens in various ways take part in the discussions and decisions that impact on their lives is axiomatic. Democracy is a complex, shifting and contested political order, and the contexts and modes of participation vary greatly; new forms are continually evolving. While we in this presentation emphasise political participation, broadly understood, a democratic horizon would also include cultural participation, a theme that Fornäs and Xinaris discuss in their article in this issue. The concept of participation actually emerges from a number of different fields and discourses in the social sciences and thus its meaning may vary somewhat (see Carpentier 2011). Its ubiquity can easily lead to it being taken for granted, with its significance seen as bland and uncontroversial. Here we underscore two core aspects of the concept. First, participation should be understood as an expression of agency in some democratic political sense – even if it is not always clear today where participation in broader social and cultural activities, including consumption, ends, and where civil society and politics begin. That problem, however, ultimately derives from the changing character of politics itself, as we discuss below. Second, following Carpentier (2011) we posit that it is important to distinguish between participation and a few associated terms. In particular, it should not be confused with mere access to the media, nor with interaction. These are both necessary elements but not sufficient for genuine participation. What is it that these two terms lack? Basically they avoid the issue of power relations.

Today, we find all too many settings in which participation is rhetorically evoked, but remains at the level of access or interaction (“Go online and express your views to the city council – participate in local government!”). Democratic participation must at some point and in some way actualise and embody power relations, however weak or remote they may seem. Formalised representation

and voting – assuming validity and transparency – embody participation, as do innumerable micro-contexts of citizen input. Participation, in short, is ultimately about forms of power sharing.

Existing ‘democracy’ does not automatically guarantee extensive civic participation, either in parliamentary or extra-parliamentary contexts; democratic systems offer varying patterns or structures of opportunity for participation. There are a number of factors that impinge on how participation actually functions at any particular point in time for any particular group, e.g. closed party machines, lack of representation for many groups, inaccessibility of power holders. The extent to which civic participation is present of course depends on the initiatives that citizens themselves take, but an analytically fundamental point is that such agency is always contingent on circumstances. Thus, any perceived lack of participation should not be seen as simply a question of civic apathy, but must be understood in the context of the dilemmas of late modern democracy more generally. Democracy is being transformed as its social, cultural and political foundations evolve, and the character of participation is a part of these large developments.

This text is written against the backdrop of several concurrent crises that are profoundly shaping contemporary Europe. The economic–financial crisis within the EU (and globally) is generating a social crisis of welfare, of desperation among many people, not least the young who are facing severe levels of unemployment. This in turn is generating a political crisis, as many governments are unable to meet both the needs of their citizens and the requirements for financial equilibrium. And finally, we would suggest, democracy itself is entering a crisis period, where the current stresses and strains are eroding the taken-for-granted socio-cultural prerequisites on which democracy is premised.

The tendency for political power to drift away from the accountable democratic system and into the private sector is not per se new, but has greatly intensified under the logics of neoliberal versions of societal development (see, for example, Harvey 2006; 2011; Fisher 2009; Gray 2009). This not only undermines participation and subverts democracy, but also has destructive social consequences (Bauman 2011). Hay (2007) pinpoints a variety of neoliberal mechanisms in public life:

*privatization, the contracting-out of public services, the marketization of public goods, the displacement of policy-making autonomy from the formal political realm to independent authorities, the rationalization and insulation from critique of neoliberalism as an economic paradigm, and the denial of policy choice (for instance in discerning the imperatives of competitiveness in an era of globalization) are all forms of depoliticization. Each serves, effectively, to diminish and denude the realm of formal public political deliberation ... Moreover, the increasing adoption of a range of political marketing techniques has also resulted in a narrowing of the field of electoral competition (Hay 2007, 159).*

When market logic becomes defined as the most appropriate way forward for societal development, the space for meaningful democratic participation by citizens becomes diminished. Discussion about norms, values and justice is undercut, as economic thinking puts price tags on just about all areas of human life (Sandel 2011). This erodes the political, fostering depoliticisation (Straume 2011), disengage-

ment and disempowerment. Further, the neoliberal horizon impacts not only on policy, but also on cultural perceptions, shaping social relations and social ideals (see, for example, Couldry 2010; Young 2007).

Despite the grim global crisis that was set in motion in 2008, there has been no concerted effort among elite power circles to reconsider this model or reform the system of international finance (Crouch 2011). Concurrently, as the intricate weave of globalisation becomes all the more complex, all levels of government experience diminishing space for decision-making. This renders governance all the more difficult, leading to further constraints on effective democratic participation.

### Engagement, Disengagement, Re-engagement

If participation is a visible manifestation of civic agency, we should keep in mind that there is a subjective requirement, namely engagement, i.e. a sense of involvement in the questions of political life. If citizens are without engagement, democracy becomes functionally crippled as well as potentially delegitimised. Thus, media should be seen as not just facilitating participation, but also as preparing for participation in the affective and normative dispositions they may help engender. For many people, disempowerment and political disenchantment point in the direction of depoliticisation – a withdrawal from the political. For others, however, it becomes a signal to mobilise.

Indeed, there is another narrative that runs parallel to the one about disengagement, and research tells us that the affordances of the web, especially social media, play an important role here. We have been witnessing new forms of engagement and participation. These are often located beyond mainstream party politics, in the broad and sprawling arena of alternative politics. Yet, political disaffection has often been understood in the narrow terms of formal electoral politics, and in such reasoning, the explanations quickly turn to models of civic apathy. However, if we see politics in a broader sense, as extending far beyond the party domain, then such disengagement itself can at times be potentially understood as a political act, a refusal to be involved in a pointless exercise. Thus, we frame as conscious alternatives the civic engagement emerging in social movements, single issue groups, neighbourhood associations, interest organisations, and other collectivities.

Given that large numbers of citizens feel that the established political parties are not listening to them or that they are actually marginalised by the political system, many are turning to alternative paths of participation. Such paths promote new forms of engagement and new political practices, which is even altering the way politics gets done in some settings. If we then look at the field of alternative political participation (where actors may or may not still engage in the party system), the argument concerning apathy falls apart. Moreover, alternative politics signals a growing transformation of the political field, of political practices, and the modes of political agency.

Many activists within alternative politics sense that strategic pressure can be brought upon decision makers in different ways. These impulses contribute to the development of what Rosanvallon (2008) terms counter-democracy, the process whereby citizens, in various constellations, exercise indirect democratic power by bypassing the electoral system. These developments, though in many ways encouraging, are not without their dark side: the present crises have meant that

reengagement also includes the rise of political activities on the far right, expressing racist, ultra-nationalistic and other anti-democratic sentiments.

### The Dynamics of Democracy

Democracy needs both a functioning representative system with parties and a viable domain of alternative, extra-parliamentary politics; both at present are in transition. Both are also shaped in positive and negative ways by media. Our horizons acknowledge the importance of electoral politics and we suggest continued attention to that realm, but in the light of the crises we mentioned above we would prioritise a research focus on alternative politics and the development of counter-democracy. In a time of tumultuous change it is important to highlight newer 'agonistic' (Mouffe 1999) trends in political life.

The components of political agency thus appear to resonate more immediately in people's lifeworlds of meanings and identity. The task of comprehending democratic agency and participation directs our attention to parameters at the taken-for-granted level that shape people's willingness to engage in politics. In this domain, the mechanisms of power are more subtle. The perspective of civic cultures and their affordances can illuminate elements that enable/disable a sense of civic self in daily life via the promotion of such dimensions as knowledge, trust, values and practices (Dahlgren 2009). Such cultures can be strongly empowering, but they are often fragile and easily eroded by various strategic measures or even merely adverse circumstances.

Where the public sphere has traditionally been associated with notions of rational deliberation, it is now increasingly linked to new, multimedia communicative channels that often privilege other forms of political expression, including the visual, the symbolic, the affective, the experiential. The traditionally textual has not disappeared, but text online tends to be shorter than in print, and shares the stage with these other communicative modes. This shift may also correspond to an increasingly visible dichotomy between traditional institutional and non-institutional, alternative politics. Thus, we should expect that the modes of political expression of counter-democracy may differ somewhat from those of electoral politics. Moreover, the affective character of much online communication suggests that it may well resonate with identity processes and collective memories in ways that traditional political discourse is less likely to do, suggesting that we should be alert to the different cultural patterns whereby alternative politics may function to reconfigure democracy.

## Media Connections

### Mediatisation – and Its Contexts

Mediatisation is a term that first of all invokes the ubiquity and pervasiveness of media in the contemporary world. From the macro-institutions that structure society to the nooks and crannies of our everyday lives, media have become an inexorable component. In today's world, media are no doubt the most significant spaces where civic cultures can flourish – as well as be obstructed. It may help to think of media not merely as technologies, but rather as means through which much of the life of society takes place. Moreover, media are never mere neutral conduits: they have their own varying contingencies and logics, which serve to

refract communication and cultural patterns in specific ways; this is the second dimension of mediatisation, that media are always involved in impacting on that which is mediated. Understandably, the intersection of political life with media becomes a very complex arena of investigation, not least because of the difficulty that democracy and forms of participation have in accompanying the accelerated pace of transformation in the media landscape. Such technological evolution has profound implications for political life, and it is thus essential to have a grasp of the media terrain.

We should take care to avoid technological determinism in our view of media; there is nothing automatic about their social consequences. Rather, media should be seen as enabling infrastructures (Miller 2011) whose uses and implications can lead in a variety of directions. As technical infrastructures, media are predicated on political economic and policy dimensions as well as on technical aspects. In recent years these features have increasingly come under critical scrutiny, and it is becoming all the more evident that along with their democratic potential, the digital media also embody attributes that are increasingly problematic in regard to participation.

Ultimately our premise here is that research on media and democracy, especially concerning engagement and participation, needs to be rethought in the light of both the rapidly changing media landscape as well as the current crises. These crises are altering the life circumstances of many citizens as well as threatening the character and quality of democracy itself.

### Political, Economic and Technological Contingencies

The political economy and the architecture of the web generally and social media in particular underscore that these communication technologies are not just a powerful infrastructure for all sorts of purposes, but also that they are not simply neutral platforms for involvement. Their present arrangements raise serious problems from a democracy perspective. In the words of Curran, Fenton & Freedman (2012, 179), “the internet itself is not constituted solely by its technology but also by the way it is funded and organised, by the way that it is designed, imagined and used, and by the way it is regulated and controlled.” The empowerment that the net does offer citizens is thus confronted by other relations of power in which citizens are rendered subordinate. These contradictions suggest continuous tensions of power and interests, an aspect we need to keep in view to understand the links between the web and democracy. As politics in society generally takes on a larger presence online, the prevailing structures of established power in society are increasingly mediated, solidified, negotiated and challenged via these media.

Today, with over two billion people operating online globally (and about half of them on Facebook), the web is a site of intense capitalist expansion. Of the twenty top websites in the US, only one, Wikipedia, is not profit driven with advertising (Fuchs 2011, 273). The deepening commercial logic of the web and its growing commodification alters how we think about it and how we use it. Social media have become a terrain for intense marketing, PR and business activity. Van Dijk (2013) shows how the logic of Facebook (and other social media platforms) has since the middle of the last decade moved towards automated connections driven by technology and economic models. This replaces the original mode of user-driven

and user-controlled social connectedness, appropriating sociality and corrupting the notion of 'friend'.

The prioritisation of deregulation policies in the traditional media is mirrored in the newer media, where content convergence and ownership concentration is also visible. The fact that large media companies preside over not only content but also access can easily result in the accentuation of existing digital divides – or contribute to the creation of new ones. We should be wary especially when much of the prevalent discourse on networks is that of neutrality. The prominence of Google and a few other global giants in the information industries engenders a number of issues on their own that are problematic for democracy (Cleland & Brodsky 2011; Fuchs 2011; Vaidhyanatha 2011). In our use of social media we make accessible all sorts of electronic traces about ourselves; this personal information is gathered, stored, processed, sold and used – for the most part legally – for chiefly commercial purposes. One upshot of this strategy is an increasing personalisation of advertising that targets consumers in an individualised manner (Turow 2011).

Yet the lack of privacy also extends into our ostensibly non-economic social relations: Facebook, for example, is becoming an increasingly dangerous terrain in regard to privacy issues, and the legal frameworks lag far behind (see Andrews 2011; MacKinnon 2012; van Dijk 2013). The utility of information is contextual; with just a shift in context, personal information can take on all sorts of significance beyond mere commercial gain; we have reason to be concerned. Moreover, the personalisation of information also means that in the past three years or so, some search engines tailor their results based on the profile they have put together of the person searching on the basis of query history and data gathered from social networking sites. For example, Google has sought to customise searches since December 2009 so as to cater to users' preferences, and Bing has followed suit since February 2011 (Pariser 2011; Crum 2011). Thus, two people using the same search word may well not get the same search results, which can play havoc with the whole notion of shared, public knowledge.

### Media and Public Spheres

Traditional mass media journalism, as the classic medium of the public sphere, is a key institution of the public sphere, and its functioning is vital to the dynamics of democracy. It has historically often been the object of legitimate criticism, when in its less impressive moments it fosters ignorance and disorientation. The latter tendencies have flourished in recent decades with the intensifying crisis within Western journalism, which has been characterised as both an institutional/economic downturn and a professional decline. Reliable news useable for civic purposes is increasingly replaced by sensationalism, celebrity gossip and other trivia, and factual content increasingly gives way to opinion (see *State of the News Media* 2013, for the current annual report on the transformation of journalism in the US; see also Russell 2011). Yet, even when journalism is providing a good professional service, and when citizens are connected to public issues via news coverage, it has been shown that journalism in itself is insufficient in facilitating participation if citizens do not feel that there are meaningful opportunities for them to engage politically (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham 2007). This reminds us that there are limits to what the media can do in altering structural relations of power.

The familiar problematic patterns follow mainstream journalism onto the web, but in the online world other forms of journalism also become visible: from the major news organisations' reliance on social media and citizen-provided material to alternative news agencies, various kinds of blogs, quasi-journalistic material, and information provided by all sorts of organisations and activist/interest groups (Atton 2005; Crick 2009; Forde 2011; Waltz 2005). The terrain has become bewildering and highly contested, but at the same time does allow for much more civic participation than before (Papacharissi 2009; Tunney & Monaghan 2010). Further options for civic participation are found in the seemingly infinite possibilities for discussion and debate available online, and beyond that the whole universe of groups, networks, activists, and movements with their online presence. Online spaces have become an important extension of the public sphere and thus of great significance for participation in a variety of forms. At the same time, issues arise about the appropriation of civic contributions into mainstream news organisations, about the status of professionalism, tensions over editorial control, and not least about how we are to ascertain genuine commitment to the truth from such a multiplicity of voices (see Fenton 2011; Barkho 2013).

#### Attention: The Political and the Popular

Further, in public sphere contexts, we should bear in mind that the density of the web environment in the contemporary media landscape results in an intense and incessant competition for attention. The entire media sphere, including the web environment, is strongly dominated by entertainment, popular culture, consumption, and massive amounts of information that have no apparent bearing on the dynamics of democracy. We underscore that there is not only nothing a priori negative about these domains, but also they are an essential and indispensable part of modern life, of society and culture. Everyone can find meaningful and rewarding areas of engagement in these domains – and debates about values, aesthetics, and the state of our civilisation that they reflect will and should continue.

Nonetheless, the pleasure of such engagement has to be analytically set in contrast to the 'serious work' required of people in their role as citizens in the public sphere. Moreover, modern media can offer intense experiential immersions with strong affective valences, further putting the question of political participation at a competitive disadvantage. Thus, while they can facilitate political participation in ways that are historically unprecedented, today's media also offer attractive and almost infinite opportunity for engagement in other domains as well (see Olsson & Dahlgren 2010). One might add that such possibilities are both technological achievements as well as a by-product of a degree of affluence and of democracy itself: the political and economic liberty to pursue such engagements is not available in all societies. If it has been the case that throughout the history of democracy most people's engagement most of the time is not directed towards political issues, the starkness of this competition for attention and engagement has become more pronounced; in theory, it is always with us, not least while we are using the keyboard, smartphone or iPad.

While political participation is usually the underdog in the competition for people's engagement in the online world – we are much more used to being addressed as consumers than citizens – research in recent years has underscored

that the boundaries between such identities are becoming increasingly fluid via media cultures (e.g. Bennett 2008). The public sphere and popular culture (to use a simplified but handy rubric) are not separate universes, but in subtle ways intermingle and feed off each other (see van Zoonen 2005; Hermes 2005; Street 1997; Coleman 2007; Corner 2009). The political can manifest itself in the popular, and enhancing the popular character of the political can strengthen democracy – on the condition that the pitfalls of populism can be avoided. The porousness of the boundaries derives in part from the converging media logic that both realms adhere to. The upshot of this is that aspects of popular culture need to be considered as potentially (affectively) relevant for mediated citizenship and as a port of entry into the political, particularly in the web environment, where the overall participatory ethos is strongly developed.

There are also, however, more sombre tones to this development. Authors such as Dean (2010) and Papacharissi (2010) argue that it is not just a question of people choosing politics or popular culture, but that the web environment in its present form promotes a transformation of political practice and social relations whereby the political becomes altered and embodied in the practices and discourses of privatised consumption. In this perspective there is an analytic and normative insistence on the acceptable limits of the porous boundaries: at some point they become detrimental to the health of democracy.

### The Web and Participation: Contested Voices

An important attribute of the web is its capacity to facilitate horizontal communication: people and organisations can directly link up with each other for purposes of sharing information as well as affect, for providing mutual support, organising, mobilising, or solidifying collective identities. This feature makes it a potentially strong facilitator of civic culture, helping to strengthen engagement and participation. Digital networks, in the form of polycentric nodes, offer a communication structure which can foster democratic social relations, as Castells (2010) and Fenton (2012) demonstrate, impacting on how civic agency is enacted and how politics gets done. It is important to underscore the social character of such activity: the networking involved helps to avoid the debilitating consequences of isolation, promotes interaction, and helps to forge collective identities.

The digital media are embedded in the larger social and cultural world, intertwined with peoples' lives online and offline; they are central to the functioning of groups, organisations, and institutions. Thus, they manifest enormous sociological complexity (see Couldry 2012) and give rise to much debate. If many observers side with Sunstein (2008) in regard to how the participatory "wisdom of the many" (as manifested, for example, in Wikipedia and the blogosphere) is producing new and better forms of knowledge, others such as Keen (2008) warn of the dangers of participatory Web 2.0, arguing that it erodes our values, standards, and creativity, as well as undermines cultural institutions. Some critics (e.g. Carr 2010) raise concern that the logic of the web is subverting our abilities to think, read, and remember, with dangerous long-term consequences. Such debates will and should continue.

Not surprisingly, the significance of the web for politics has also given rise to a great deal of debate, with some authors leaning – based on empirical and normative considerations – towards more optimistic interpretations (for example,

Benkler 2006; Castells 2010), while others take more pessimistic views (Mozorov 2011; Goldberg 2010; Hindman 2009; Song 2009). In the extensive literature, for sceptics the limitations of the web as a democratic technology come into view. For one thing, the use of the web for political purposes (at least defined in traditional terms) comes quite far down on the list of activities, far behind consumption, entertainment, social connections, pornography, and so on. For another thing, there is a strong tendency for people to drift towards like-minded discursive ‘cocoon’ or ‘echo chambers’ on the web, where they are less likely to be confronted with views that differ from their own and develop the capacity for genuine argument. Also, although the net is a most impressive tool, it does not on its own mobilise people who lack political engagement. And encounters with those who do think differently are often characterised by a decided lack of civility.

Also, this literature reminds us that the web does not operate in a social vacuum (e.g. Loader & Merce 2012; Feenberg & Freisen 2012). It is crucial, for example, that there is sufficient online sociality to attract people to step into their identities as political agents. People continue to develop their civic practices in online settings as they find new ways to participate, using these evolving communication technologies. We must avoid reductionist thinking; policy discourses and journalistic commentary at times can lead us astray in this regard, in suggesting that just the introduction of such media technologies will offer some simple solution to democracy’s problems. For example the uprisings during the Arab Spring were often simplistically framed as ‘Twitter revolutions’ (for more analytic views, see for instance, *Communication Review* 2011, and *Journal of Communication* 2012).

Yet, with all the caution and caveats that should rightly be kept in sight, the tools are becoming more and more effective, less expensive, and easier to use than in the past; access and collaboration are increasing, and we are evolving from being mostly media consumers to include many media producers – or ‘producers’ (Bruns 2006). Some decades ago, Toffler coined the term ‘prosumer’ (1971) to reflect the appearance of a more ‘literate’ and engaged consumer of goods whose demands required heading through the production of increasingly customised items. The shift from prosumer to producer now indicates that the possibility for emancipation is regarded as residing in novel modes of user-generated content production rather than in modes of on-demand personalised consumption. The web is altering the contingencies of politics and the political, and there are sound reasons to remain encouraged about its potential for facilitating democratic participation. One could say that the digital media in particular are very good in helping to promote a subjective civic empowerment, an enhanced sense of agency that can make use of many kinds of participatory activity: what we can call civic practices.

### Media Literacy: Mobilising a Particular Version

One terrain of research often associated with the web’s potential for democratic enhancement is media literacy (see Erstad & Amdam 2013 for a detailed overview of the literature). There are various trajectories with differing premises in this research, but we align ourselves with the critical angle underscored by, for example, Buckingham (2003; 2009) and Livingstone (2010). Thus, we emphasise that media literacy should be less an issue about technical capacities, and more oriented toward critical, normative reflection (for example, on democracy, consumption, one’s lifeworld, etc.); less of an individual pedagogic issue, and more anchored in

inexorably collective contexts; less having to do with formal education, and more with democratic agency. It strikes us that genuine empowerment in the political world must be the ultimate goal of media literacy. Inherent in such a vision is also a drive towards seeking and sharing the truth as best as it can be understood, for example in the context of journalistic activities. Media literacy goes via the media, yet must also connect with the offline world, as well as link the individual's life-world to larger societal contexts. Media literacy needs to have civic practices and identities in its sights.

The optimism visible in the policy attempts in regard to media literacy to combat digital divides, to enhance knowledge, and to promote the social uses of digital media as a universal right seems to collide with a tangible pessimism at the practical level. Yet it is important to keep in mind the long-term processes by which people develop into empowered citizens, how they come to see themselves as members and potential participants in societal development. Civic interaction is the discursive practice – deliberative or not – through which individuals construct their collective sense of self and their shared memories as belonging to a group. These processes are essential catalysts for the reconfiguration of democracy. In aligning itself with and committing itself to these visions, media literacy would define its fundamental democratic *raison d'être* and become a central ingredient in a new research agenda.

## Foundations for a New Research Agenda

The evolution of media forms that are open to user-generated content, produced at low cost and with little editorial control, pave the way for a dilution of the dichotomy between producer and consumer. In the logic of online networks, this is conducive to new, citizen-oriented participatory practices. Yet the web environment is also shaped by the logics of profit (deploying not least massive surveillance of media behaviour) and consumption, and the freedom presupposed by democracy cannot be reduced to that of the market. As we have seen, the web as an infrastructure is shaped by a number of contingencies that are problematic from democratic horizons and cannot be treated as a neutral terrain. Consumerism as a mode of engagement, as well as the pleasures of popular culture, may well offer potential for democratic participation, but the political economy and the symbolic environment of commodification present challenges to be confronted in this regard. Yet as we have contended, despite these and other difficulties, online media offer new and significant possibilities for civic empowerment in comparison to other communicative channels.

The research agenda we have in mind does not constitute an absolute break with the past, but rather a shift in emphasis to better account for the developments we have discussed. Indeed, some of the research we envision has already been underway in some corners, and we have built upon these efforts in our discussion here. What follows is both a distillation of key points we have noted thus far and a projection into how these horizons can nourish a new research agenda.

### Topics and Thematics

From the above we can pull out what we see to be the main currents, and carry these forward into our suggestions for a future research agenda. We note that our

discussion has been quite wide-ranging, certainly going beyond what might be considered the normal boundaries of media and communication studies. Thus, one current that runs through our research suggestions is the need for cross-disciplinary cooperation at various points. There is much relevant pre-existing research in other fields to mobilise and build upon. Moreover, it is important to develop deeper functional research contacts, especially with colleagues in political science and political sociology who are involved in research on participation, citizenship, etc. Cultural studies, anthropology, history and other fields also have important things to offer. In a sense it is fortunate that media and communication studies is in itself quite eclectic, with many researchers coming from and/or making use of perspectives from other areas. Interdisciplinarity is often lauded – the traditional disciplinary boundaries and taxonomies have shown themselves to be increasingly constrictive. Yet one must be aware of issues of commensurability in terms of shared premises and approaches. For example, much of mainstream political science tends to focus on electoral politics and does not focus much on other forms of civic practices and their relations to identity and other cultural themes.

Our overarching angle is to prioritise research attention on what we would term ‘political agency in context’. Thus, research must be adamant about specifying the forms and modes of engagement and participation as well as their contingencies. Unpacking this thought leads us to two steps in the development of a future research agenda. First we specify a key set of (overlapping) research topics, which consists of a distillation from our discussions above. These topics itemise specific research areas. To enhance the potential breadth and multidimensional character of the research agenda, we also propose four central thematics that can serve to stimulate, structure and coordinate research of a multidisciplinary character. The specific topics can inform each of the thematics in various ways. The topics we have in mind are:

Engagement (and disengagement): what are its subjective perceptions, its expressions in regard to political, identities, knowledge, and normative frameworks?

Participation (and its absences): what are its extent and modes in specific situations, and how does it relate to the key dimensions of agency (i.e. knowledge, values, practices, identities, and memory)? Embedded here is also the question of the evolving manifestations of politics and the political.

Maps and genealogies of power (and counter-power), which elucidate how power is produced, reproduced, and altered with the help of new technologies – i.e. both from a political economy perspective as well as from a perspective that focuses on the production of subjectivity.

The web’s role in contributing to the development of participation via the enhancement of civic agency, knowledge, practices and identities; this includes opening up the traditional public sphere to issues that are not associated with formal politics – i.e. looking at how the web can help promote counter-democracy.

How existing engagement in popular culture, consumption, and sociality might be linked to the political.

The overarching social, cultural, economic and political parameters that impact on political participation, the contextual prerequisites and settings of such agency. This analytically weaves together aspects of social structures/institutions with communication technologies, the socio-cultural parameters of media environments, and concrete organisation and collectivities.

In what ways can media literacy be linked to the notion of democratic engagement, especially among young citizens and how can it be connected to their lifeworlds?

Where and how – beyond the classroom – can media literacy be taught? By whom? For whom?

What kind of social and media policy is needed to foster the democratic potential of the digital media?

Our four thematics become:

- (1) Panoramas of society, democracy, and the media landscape;
- (2) Profiles (macro) of media use;
- (3) Portraits (micro) of political agency;
- (4) Perspectives: mediatisation and political participation.

The distinctions between them are in part schematic, but taken together these thematics also signal a specific strategy of research organisation, which will hopefully help facilitate and coordinate the goals of research initiatives. Throughout the four thematics issues of methodology can become pertinent, as we discuss below. The first three thematics can in a sense be seen as comprising knowledge that is important on its own yet also contribute as prerequisites for the final thematic area. Thus, these first three address the contexts and highlight the contingencies that become embodied in the final thematic, ‘Perspectives’. This thematic can be seen as the most ambitious one, yielding analytic results that can be directly useful for policy and regulation.

### Panoramas of Society, Democracy and the Media Landscape

This thematic comprises broad vistas that serve as background, anchoring the historical specificity of the more detailed topics to come. It is based less on original data gathering and more on compiling, synthesising and analysing existing literature having to do with basic power arrangements in regard to social structure, political economy and the distribution of resources, both material and symbolic, emphasising shifts across time and manifestations of crises. This work of contextualisation, focused on national, local and transnational levels (including the EU and beyond), would have two basic points of focus:

**1. *The State of Democracy.*** This would include issues of representation and accountability, leadership, and perceptions of trust and legitimacy in regard to politicians and democratic political systems. The focus would also have in its sights structural opportunities for participation in formal politics, as well as the state of counter-democracy and alternative politics.

**2. *The Media Mandscape, Especially the Web and Social Media.*** The goal would be to try to develop a clear picture of the (ever-shifting) media landscape, in terms of its institutional, economic, technological and discursive dimensions. This would certainly include the institutions of journalism and their practices, which constitute an important – and rapidly evolving – dimension of the media landscape. Journalism also takes on relevance for participation (see below). We know that the extent of such research varies considerably between countries, and therefore the extent of complementary research required would vary.

## Profiles (Macro) of Media Use

Here we envision on the one hand a largely descriptive strand that would consist chiefly of compilations of existing and ongoing survey research. The aim would be to put together overarching profiles of media usage within the population as a whole as well as for strategically selected groups. The web and mobile media would be in focus, but these would have to be situated in the context of the larger media landscape. Such research would also include the evolution of use patterns, socio-cultural impact on daily life and institutions.

A second, more analytic strand would no doubt require more original research; the aim here would be to illuminate media use in relation to social connections, collective identities, social capital, and so forth, in order to map the discursive flow of power and opinion formation. For this strand we make a case for the methodology of social network analysis (SNA) in particular (Monge & Contractor 2003; Wasserman & Faust 1994). SNA consists of a methodology that attempts to map out the macrostructures that arise from the individual tendency to more frequently link up with people with whom we share similar group interests. By drawing attention to the location of individual agents in the network – i.e. whether they are to be found in the centre or periphery of the network, the extent to which they establish direct or indirect connections between centre and periphery – SNA can be helpful in tracing the relations of power that condition network information flow.

According to Benkler's (2006) theory of the networked public sphere, the vast distribution of the web promotes the democratisation of public discourse, allowing the latter to distance itself from control by any elite. However, although any point of view can be expressed online – amounting to what Benkler terms 'universal intake' – it will only be 'carried upward' in the network if other discussants find it interesting (Etling et al. 2010, 1227). As such, public discussion online undergoes a process of 'collective filtration', the upshot of which is to distil and clarify public opinion. Such clarification bases itself on the premise that that which is most appealing to a majority is that which will be taken up by the network.

Different methodological approaches may be useful in analysing how power is produced and reproduced through the web, both internally as well as externally, i.e. by use. If SNA allows us to trace prevalent power relations on the web, by mapping out subject positions online with regard to the degrees of connections established between centre and periphery, other methodologies, for example ethnography, can help focus on how individuals use the web in their daily lives so as to perpetuate or resist subject positionings. As such, both methodologies can complement each other: if the first permits that we examine political economy hegemonies by focusing on how nodes of discourse link up to large corporation websites, etc., the second contemplates a more individualised perspective on how 'micro-publics' become active agents in their use of the web to promote both individual and collective identities.

Both of these methodologies, aimed at the larger patterns of web use, must be complemented with sociological studies that make visible how and to what extent power sharing and networking in the online domain translate into offline power relations. In particular, research needs to link media use with the mechanisms by which citizens are included and excluded from genuine participation. The online domain is distinctive in its own way and thus must be researched accordingly,

but the social world today and the issues of power and participation comprise the inseparable interface of on- and offline domains.

Also, we must add a very cautionary note in regard to SNA: such research readily becomes entwined with what has come to be called Big Data, i.e. the socio-technical phenomenon where huge amounts of data are routinely gathered about people and their behaviour, especially in regard to digital media. As noted above, this is the core business strategy of social media platforms and has become increasingly contested because of surveillance and privacy violations (see Boyd & Crawford 2012; Oboler, Welsh & Cruz 2012). Thus, it must be approached by critical research in a careful manner, with sensitivity to the ethical and political issues involved. Also, such data must be used selectively, given the enormous costs involved.

### Portraits (Micro) of Political Agency

This thematic, using both survey and qualitative/ethnographic data, is aimed at illuminating the concrete aspects of engagement/disengagement, as well as highlighting the subjective components of participation and non-participation, including their modes, strategies, and practices/skills. Practices are evolving all the time, especially in tandem with new technological affordances; thus, the realm of participatory journalism is one which has emerged very strongly in the past decade as a particular mode of participation – both in the media, and in society via the media. While exploring subjectivity at the individual level, the target is not isolated individuals, but rather meaning processes as they relate to forms of collective identities, organisation, networking, and the relationship between the personal and the political. Research must take in both the repressive and productive dimensions of power, and connect them with agency, looking at which types of agencies are repressed and which are enabled or produced by the use of the web.

Within this panorama one would also address the themes of public spheres and popular culture, consumer and civic practices, and the boundaries and blending between them. Research here would be alert for: new conceptions of politics and the political; new forms of practice and skills; new kinds of experience that are relevant for participation.

### Perspectives: Mediatisation and Political Participation

As mentioned, it is intended that this final thematic, a sort of integrated, analytic payoff, would be the one most relevant for policy and regulation as well as civil society and its various actors. It builds upon, incorporates and extends the knowledge and insights from the previous three thematics.

A main premise from the start has been the avoidance of technological determinism, which has led us to emphasise contingencies, and the factors that make possible, shape, as well as delimit and deflect political participation. The interplay of media with their social, economic, cultural and political settings, as well as the overarching attributes of social structure and power relations, thus play a central conceptual role. Concretely, we advocate researching existing examples of counter-democratic groups and their media use, in order to extract useful lessons from their experiences that could be applied in other contexts. In so doing, we would bring to bear results, conclusions and insights from the previous thematics.

To begin with, such research would have to target participation understood in very broad terms, as we mentioned earlier: from the classic hard-core political,

to newer kinds of issues and areas of engagement. While some attention must be devoted to electoral politics and the vicissitudes of voter subjectivity and practices, the emphasis would be on the wide-ranging fields of alternative politics. One would select a broad range of arenas of involvement, from networks, movements and activist groups, to transitory issue mobilisation. Various corners of civil society, popular culture, and consumption would be targeted in search of new modes of the political. Even examples of questionable, deviant expressions of political disposition would be included. Further, in the light of the fragmentation of the public sphere and the increasing personalisation of information via digital media, a key question to be addressed is that of shared public knowledge. This notion has traditionally been a pillar in the study of politics, but how is it evolving in the new media landscape?

Also, effort should be made to include both more and less well organised versions of political involvement; further research would include those who in various ways might be deemed successful (based on some set of criteria), as well as those who are less so. Empirically one would select respondents visible in a variety of contexts – networks, movements, discussion groups, social media, etc. As a complementary and comparative dimension, one would also target various sets of individuals who may seem to be participating in some way, but appear to be doing so in the absence of any larger social context.

Further, in understanding civic agency, its practices and identities, a sense of the historical is important. This becomes especially significant when seeking to understand where and how political memories and meanings cohere and are sustained and how this may change in a digital age; and also in understanding why certain contexts result in certain political desires or passions coming to the fore (when they are haunted by a particular politics of the past). The key analytic components would include the specifics around communication technologies, organisation, civic agency and its practices/skills, prevalent discourses, and identity processes. The establishment of these (or related) sets of concepts would help enhance consistency and possible comparative dimensions in future research.

We have mentioned that ‘media’ are not a singular and unified phenomenon and that attention must be paid to the specific definitive attributes. There are many possible ways to classify media, but certainly it is essential to chart uses and strategies that combine different media and platforms, including between mainstream and alternative, and even digital and non-digital (Mattoni 2012). Any categorisation scheme can of course only be a starting point, since in the modern media landscape we are seeing an increase of hybridisation, where media forms combine and/or cross boundaries (see Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier 2008). Moreover, each particular situation or political struggle has its own circumstances (see, for example, Cammaerts, Mattoni & McCurdy 2012), though lessons can of course be shared.

While items on the longer list of concrete topics will no doubt continue to inspire specific studies in the years ahead, it is our hope that the four thematics – the panoramas, the profiles, the portraits and the perspectives – will help give rise to coordinated and integrated research programmes that can critically address the processes of mediatisation and political participation, as well as illuminate their significance for the health of democracy.

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