

Digital Media, Political Polarization and Challenges to Democracy

An International Symposium

organized by

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Department of Sociology | University of York

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Public Lecture

Prof. W. Lance Bennett, University of Washington

21 September 2017, 18:00 | ORF – The Austrian Broadcasting Corporation

Keynote Speakers

Michael X. Delli-Carpini, Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Jörg Matthes, Department of Communication, University of Vienna

Barbara Pfetsch, Institute for Media and Communication Studies, Free University of Berlin

Call for Papers (Long Version)

Topic and aim of the conference. The forms of communication through which politics is conducted by states and citizens have been, and will continue to be, subject to a constant process of change, which is accelerated by technological innovations. With the rapid rise of digital media, this development has reached a new level. For centuries, processes of political communication used to be primarily linear, with messages transferred from politicians, governments and parties to the media and from the media to the citizens at large. The question here is to what extent and with which societal and political consequences digital media disrupt this linear form.

This question is fueled by growing political distrust, confusion, and conflict throughout the Western world, which seem to shake the democratic system to its foundations. Even those who would not go as far as Colin Crouch when he speaks of the dawning of a “post-democratic” age cannot deny that in many European countries as well as in the United States there is growing criticism of the form of democracy that has emerged in the majority of constitutions and of its leading institutions and methods of procedure. Among young people, turnout at elections is below average for the population as a whole, and it continues to fall. Traditional loyalties are getting weaker, and party membership is in steady decline. Trust in democratic organizations and regulatory mechanisms is on the wane. While traditional center-left and center-right parties are losing ground and are thus struggling for a clear profile, new nationalist movements on the one side, and anti-austerity protests on the other, are emerging. Political polarization becomes a defining feature of society and politics.

The Viennese conference aims to shed light on these developments by exploring the changes to politics triggered, or at least accelerated, by changing media structures and media habits on the one hand, and on the other hand by discussing the challenges to democracy brought about by those changes, as well as the role media might play in responding to these challenges.

Changing media. At first sight, all kinds of digital media have substantially extended the media repertoire of individual and institutional users, thus increasing the opportunities for news exposure, which depends on two factors: ease of access to news media (because of low financial and cognitive barriers) and ease of access to alternative media genres. At the same time, digital media have changed the conditions of production, distribution and reception of information, enabling anyone to be a recipient and producer of media content, as reflected in Bruns' concept of "produsage". Production and usage form a joint process in which contents are constantly being renegotiated and changed dynamically by multiple user groups by means of interactivity. What is happening here is a tremendous acceleration in and decentralization of processes of interaction and the exchange of information, which are brought about by the ubiquity of media communications. As a consequence, the distance between the actors of political communication will be reduced. Politicians and media are no longer the sole producers of political information; instead, non-professional actors from civil society—i.e. citizens, civic organizations and all kinds of initiatives and agencies—are actively involved in political discourse.

Changing politics. It is obvious that these new forms of public communication and social interaction are likely to affect political processes. Some scholars argue that it is precisely the universal accessibility of and the low entry barrier to the digital networks that can facilitate forms of use that threaten democracy. Political actors as well as large corporations in the private sector are increasingly turning to social media as a means of maintaining ever-greater control over citizens who find themselves enclosed in filter bubbles not only of one's own, but an algorithm's making. In this sense, the structural features of the Web do not promote a greater diversity of opinions as a precondition of social reflection, but may in fact allow the public sphere to disintegrate into disorganized partial publics because it is acknowledged that users tend to seek and are confronted with content that is deliberately prepared and filtered to meet their preferences. From this perspective, a large number of fragmented groups held together only by special interests can be assumed as a first step in the direction of a polarized society.

These changes are likely to have an undesirable impact on political legitimacy too. Reacting flexibly to the challenges posed by new communication technologies means to adapt one's strategies to the multitude of different media channels and the even greater diversity of media usage. Public relations efforts therefore must not only address the (shrinking and differentiated) mass media, but also deal with the transformation of public communication on the Internet from a two-step flow of messages to what Bennett and Manheim called a one-step flow, calling for messages to be refined and targeted directly towards individuals. This means that polling institutes and "spin doctors" are becoming even more important than they were in the days of mainstream television, which can ultimately have repercussions for politics, such as an adaptation to the logic of the media in order to get messages across. Particularly, social media logic—i.e. the norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies underpinning its dynamics—is often regarded today as the driving force behind this "mediatization" of politics that ultimately undermines the discretionary power of political authorities, thus increasing distrust in the democratic system as such.

Challenges to democracy. It is often argued that the low and still decreasing levels of political trust in the main institutions of democratic representation and aggregation of interest go hand in hand with the growing discontent with the democratically elected government, thus increasing social susceptibility for radical messages or, at least, political apathy. On the other hand, there is clear evidence of a development towards a more participatory, commons-based understanding of citizenship, particularly among young people. When, however, the contemporary shift in citizens' political attitudes and behavior depends to a certain degree on the use of

digital communication technologies, then not only their potential to jeopardize, but also to foster democracy has to be explored.

Shifting the focus from ensuring system performance (via voting and party membership) to supporting the system *as such*, new approaches like Bennett and Segerberg's "logic of connective action" (in contrast to the traditional dynamics of organization-centered and brokered "collective action") are needed. These should draw on the rapidly changing notions of democracy, but also conceptualize them in accordance with the nature of digitally mediated communication that influences—and perhaps organizes—changing personal relationships to society and public life. Politics and research have to face the challenge of deciding how to manage the current move away from the established structures of representative democracy—with their group-based identities and mainstream issues—towards a wider repertoire of personalized political experience and individually motivated concerns in a digitally networked society. The symposium on "Digital Media, Political Polarization and Challenges to Democracy" aims at discussing not only the causes and developments that led to the current state of society, but also proposals for citizens, journalists, media organizations, and politicians for how to revive an urgently needed autonomous public sphere in the digital future of democracy.

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Submission and selection of papers. The call is open to all social sciences. The conference would like to bring together researchers from different backgrounds, including theoretically, methodologically, and practically oriented researchers. Submissions are for 20-minute presentations. The extended abstract may not be longer than 8,000 characters (including spaces). Please add a title page to the abstract containing the name(s) and address(es) of the author(s) and the title of the presentation. Please send your proposal to cmc@oeaw.ac.at no later than **April 7, 2017** (as a PDF). All submissions will undergo blind peer review and acceptance notifications will be sent out on **April 28, 2017**.

Conference attendance. The conference is open both to presenters and non-presenters, but authors of accepted abstracts are expected to attend the conference and present their work. The conference dinner is scheduled for Friday evening. The participation fee (including welcome reception, lunches, coffee breaks and conference dinner) is EUR 100 / GBP 90 / USD 110. Registration opens on **April 28, 2017**. Please register at www.oeaw.ac.at/cmc/digital-media.

Conference organizers.

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