Social Media for Social Innovation
Towards a Multi-Layered Analytic Framework

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Abstract

This paper proposes a preliminary conceptual approach for studying how *social media* (i.e., a class of specific Internet-based communication tools) can be strategically employed to promote *social innovation* (i.e., the actual consolidation of norms guiding democratic and participated policy-making processes). To this aim, we propose to overcome monolithic conceptions of Internet users, uses and politics thus grounding empirical studies on the joint observation of a) the type of users; b) the type of Internet-enabled communication; c) the different facets of political processes; d) the multi-level nature of contemporary politics.

Introduction

In the globalization era, States have not lost their role but suffer from multiple deficits that can be overcome only leaning on the resources, competences and skills that are possessed by citizens and Internet users. In this context, transformations of politics, both at the national and at the supra national level, have been analyzed following mainly two intertwined research avenues: the first focused on how Internet-enabled communications enlarge the space of the public sphere; the second on innovative governance arrangements based on collaboration between State and non-state actors. Yet, these two analysis strands have seldom been joined together, with the overall result that our knowledge on how Internet-enabled communications can be strategically employed to enhance democracy and participation of non-state actors into policy making processes is still limited.

In this paper we argue that, to overcome this situation, a more systematic analytic effort is needed. We argue that understanding Internet users, uses and politics in a monolithic way jeopardizes the possibility to grasp the complexity of innovation dynamics and, therefore, to evaluate successes and failure of participatory arrangements. We therefore make a plea for grounding research into a multi-layered framework that looks simultaneously at: a) the type of users; b) the type of Internet-enabled communication; c) the different facets of political processes; d) the multi-level nature of contemporary politics. Not only these four ele-

ments need to be studied singularly but existing interplays between them are crucial to understand how technological advancements can be effectively translated into political advancements beyond the current limits of scale, representativeness and efficacy.

The first section of the paper illustrates briefly the main terms of the discourse on innovation of political processes in terms of enlargement of the public sphere and of innovation in governance arrangements. Starting from this background, the second section specifies better the relationship between Internet and politics thus introducing the main layers of the foreseen analytical framework. Finally, we explore at a preliminary level the interplay between these different layers.

Enlarged public sphere and governance experiments

So far, transformations of politics, both at the national and at the supra national level, have been analyzed following mainly two research avenues: the first focused on how Internet-enabled communications enlarges the space of the public sphere; the second more concentrated on innovative governance arrangements based on collaboration between State and non-state actors.

Internet communications have proved fundamental to undermine the centrality of the State as the sole protagonist of national and supra-national political processes. The space of flows enabled by the Internet hosts a wider and easier circulation of ideas, information and knowledge (Castells 1996). In empowering individuals and groups through knowledge-based resources; in allowing the formation, the display and the interplay of personal and group identities as well as the articulation of perceptions and claims, Internet becomes the backbone of a transnational, multi-layered and multi-level public sphere where a multiplicity of reflections and opinion circulate, enmesh and get articulated (Fraser 2005).

Within this enlarged public sphere, actors of non-institutional nature, e.g., Non Governmental Organizations,

transnational social movements but also individual citizens, activate both at the national (see the wave of mobilizations in Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya) and at the transnational level (see the global manifestations against Iraq war in 2003) and claim to be part of the game (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Polat 2005).

The vitality of this multi-layered and multi-level Internet-enabled public sphere is crucial to overcome the multifaceted deficit that affects traditional political actors (Hocking 2003). In this context, several participatory governance experiments, i.e., mixed interaction patterns between state and non-state actors (Pattberg 2006), have been experimented over time both at the national and at the supra-national level. One recent case is provided by the so called multi-stakeholder approach (Hemmati 2002), according to which institutional entities, business organizations and the heterogeneous universe of civil society are considered as peers and, therefore, hold the right to act on an equal foot into the political process.

And yet, these innovation strands are limited by two types of problems. In first place, there are structural constraints to the full realization of the "democratic potential" of the Internet: the so-called digital divides (Norris 2001); the information overload that hampers the creation of useful knowledge (Papacharissi 2002; Polat 2005); the tendency to reinforce online existing social ties based on some degree of face-to-face interaction (Boase et al. 2006). Ultimately, as Calhoun puts it, "*which of the possibilities opened by the Internet are in fact realized will depend on human choice, social organization and the distribution of resources*" (1998:382-83).

Secondly, there are political constraints. In first place, participatory arrangements (and multistakeholderism in particular) are adopted at the supra-national level while locally they still constitute a relatively uncommon practice. Moreover, they relate to policy framing activities, i.e., to the articulation of common visions, while they are still far from being adopted within actual deliberation processes. Although policy framing is a crucial phase of policy-making (Padovani and Pavan 2008) two kinds of problem emerge. First, a problem of representativeness, i.e., who are the actors actually participating. Second, a problem of efficacy, i.e., the impact of non-state actors' contribution. In this sense, open processes are far from being universal and the extent to which commonly shaped vision are translated into policy provisions seems to be still limited.

A multi-layered analytic framework

If the Internet can be used to revamp State's legitimacy and to achieve a greater proximity between citizens and institutions thus leading to new mechanisms of participatory policy-making processes, this potential does not seem to be fully achieved today. This not only depends on the structural and the political limitations we have just illustrated. Our knowledge of how to enhance democratic and participatory features of political processes through the active employment of Internet communications rarely goes beyond the acknowledgement that politics depend on technology by "*shaping the means of political debate: the arena, the communication links, the agenda*" (Bijker 2006: 696).

To better understand a) the extent to which participatory governance experiments (i.e., different forms of partnership between institutional and non-institutional actors) actually translate into *social innovation* (i.e., the actual consolidation of norms guiding democratic and participated policy processes); and b) how Internet-enabled communication can be strategically exploited to fulfill this goal, beyond current limits of scale, representativeness and efficacy, we argue that a more detailed and systematic analysis effort is required.

One relevant step in this direction consists in overcoming monolithic conceptions of Internet users, uses and politics. In fact, the their internal complexity that characterizes each of these elements would require not only an explicit acknowledgement but also a consistent and systematic approach of study. We therefore propose to account simultaneously for multiple layers: users, Internet-enabled communication tools, facets of the political process and the multi-level nature of contemporary politics. Not only these aspects have to be studied singularly in all their complexity but existing interplays between the four layers are crucial to understand how technological advancements can be effectively translated into political advancements.

Multiple users and multiple publics

Internet pervasiveness in our daily contexts, enhanced by communicative potential of Web 2.0 tools, should not overshadow three relevant factors: i) that Internet access is far from being universal; ii) that competences are unequally distributed amongst online users; iii) that there are differences in the degree of activity and in the motivations that lead to active contribution online.

These critical aspects point directly to the problem of *representativeness* of contributions delivered by users. User generated content cannot be thought as being representative only because it is generated by individuals. Indeed, not all citizens access the Internet and become content generators. Hence, considerations on enhanced participation should be elaborated paying specific attention to authors, their properties, motivations but also, and more importantly, looking at their social online and offline ties and to their political culture, i.e., the way in which they understand politics and the role of civic engagement.

Thus, online users are all legitimate inhabitants of the multi-level and multi-layered Internet-enabled public sphere. Yet, the heterogeneity of this space (inherently connected to users' diversity) pushes for a more systematic and detailed review of the idea of "the public" in the Internet age. In a context where actions undertaken by public authorities are subjected to the scrutiny of actors that are neither directly related nor controlled by them, the public becomes synonymous for accessibility to third parties in general. In order to regain legitimacy, state authorities must deal not only with their citizens but, more broadly, with a multiplicity of larger, heterogeneous publics. The use of the plural form is not casual: we argue that the "public", however defined, actually consists of several different publics. The unitary feature of the public sphere is questioned, as it is more reliable to envision a multiplicity of public spheres and counter-public spheres that interact amongst themselves and with the State through complex relational patterns of cooperation and conflict.

Multiple social media

Mainstream analysis looks predominantly to Internet-based communication while leaving aside other, more traditional media (such as telephone). While this fact is justified by the tremendous impact of Internet on communications, it is now challenged by digital convergence that transform "old" media into a new generation of communication tool, thus further enhancing interaction capabilities (Jakubowicz 2009). And yet, even if we leave convergence outside of the picture and limit our analysis to Internet-based communication, there is the need to draw distinctions between different tools employed to communicate with others as each tool entails different modes of interaction.

A first, obvious distinction should be made between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 tools. If the former have installed the culture of the public (defined as above in terms of accessibility to third parties) with the idea of content-publishing, the latter allow for true and enhanced participation into public discussions through individual content generation. When inquiring about the relationship between participation and politics through the Internet, we argue that a specific vision on Web 2.0 tools should be preferred and suitably articulated.

Consistently, we would like to refine the relationship between the renewal of political processes in terms of enhanced participation and the Internet looking specifically at *social media*, i.e., "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 61). Social media share the same platform (Web 2.0) and are aimed at the production of user generated content but they can be distinguished on the bases of interactions they allow (Beer 2008). Although there is not a unique way to classify social media (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010), the inherent conceptual switch consists in associating different tools (whether they are blogs, collaborative projects, social networking sites etc.) to different types of content creation and exchange.

Multiple facets of political processes

In the contemporary context, where publicity is extended to its maximum, political processes should not be thought exclusively in terms of policy-steering activities. Rather, they should be thought as dynamics conducting to the production of "public purpose" which is "an expression of vision, values, plans, policies and regulations that are valid for and directed towards the general public" (Sørensen and Torfing 2007:10).

Therefore, steering of actual policies and regulations should not be understood as the sole final goal of private-public interactions. If deliberative democracy constitute the ideal-typical threshold for total collaboration between State and non-state actors in participatory policy-steering (Baiocchi 2003), there are at least other four important political objectives that can be achieved through enhanced private-public partnerships: relationship building, gathering and exchanging information, brainstorming and problem solving, and consensus building (Susskind et al. 2003). Each of these facets of the political process are crucial. Although characterized often in terms of "soft power" (Keohane and Nye 1977), the power to shape and influence political agendas is far from being weak (Sikkink 2002).

Multi-level politics

In a context where the local and the global are mixing up one another, the distinction between domestic and foreign political affairs becomes blurred (Held et al. 1999). And yet, political processes do structure differently depending on their principal dimension: local/national; international; regional or supra-national. Different levels of political processes entail the involvement of different actors, resources and different political opportunities for public-private collaboration experiments.

It is then suitable to avoid categorization of political processes in terms of domestic or foreign issues and move towards a multi-level conceptualization of politics according to which processes can start locally and then scale to a higher level. Or, conversely, we might look at processes that start globally and isomorphically reproduce locally. In both cases, the initial level of deployment entails specific dynamics and the involvement of particular actors, whereas scaling or reproduction mechanisms imply changes at the organizational and the cultural level.

Intertwinements between layers

In general, different users generating their contents through different social media make up different publics and these, in turn, can differently exploit social media depending on the goal they want to achieve. Yet, not all publics intervene in all matters and public authorities are not ready to take into account every single suggestion provided by non-state actors. We then argue that, in order to evaluate properly success or failure in participatory arrangements, the four layers need to be put in relation one another. For example, the scale of the process implies different requirements in terms of representativeness and openness. Also, the goal of the process can further refine selection criteria and influence the choice of which social media will be exploited. A process could be labeled a failure in terms of participation just because we did not properly set our terms of comparison. A relational perspective focused on interplays between layers allows to perform this operation and to account for the complexity of real life cases.

Conclusion

If it is true that Internet can enhance politics as it enables a wider and more democratic circulation of ideas, it is also true that we have not succeeded in outlining systematically how social media can strategically be employed for social innovation. None of the participatory governance experiments that have been tried out so far seems to meet initial expectations on enhanced democracy. We believe that this depends on a generalized trend to understand Internet users, uses and politics as monolithic. The considerations we elaborated towards the definition of a multi-layered framework aim at overcoming this limit and at reaching a more genuine understanding of the complex relation between social media and social innovation.

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