Abstract: Emmanuelle Avril

*Social networks and Democracy in the English-Speaking World: Counterculture or Mainstream?*

This paper tries to bring light to the question of how citizens may be driven to find alternative spaces of expression and participation when traditional channels are perceived to function improperly. The so-called ‘democratic deficit’ in western democracies has long been exposed and discussed. Even though there are contrasted views about whether or not the phenomenon really exists and about its severity, the apparent rise of a disenfranchised, cynical citizenry has been identified as one of the most worrying trends in contemporary liberal democracies. Therefore, since the beginning of the 21st century, the need to stimulate participation has been one of the main concerns of both academic and political elites, at least in theory. In this context, the ability of the Internet to allegedly both widen and deepen participation has often been presented as an antidote to the traditional institutions’ apparent inability to satisfactorily engage with citizens. The recent development of online social media, which offer interactive, bottom-up peer-to-peer platforms for sharing and exchanging views and data as well as for campaigning, seems to hold the promise of a more connected, more influential and therefore, it is supposed, more engaged, citizenry.

However the impact of social media on participation can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The main lines of interpretation fall into two main categories reflecting two antagonistic (or complementary) conceptions of democracy. Social media can be seen either as merely supplementing representative democracy or as offering a real alternative to exhausted representative democratic regimes by way of a revival of direct democracy. In other words, social media may be seen either as offering a channel for the expression of ‘contest’ thereby fostering a more pluralistic polity or, on the contrary, as generating platforms which offer limited scope for real influence and action, ultimately comforting dominant values. This talk will attempt to account for the existing uncertainty about the benefits and harms of social networks for representative democracy.

This talk will follow three main lines of inquiry:
1. (Brief) History of online social networks.
2. (Selected) Examples of mobilisation through OSNs emphasizing the link between online and offline activities.
3. Online social networks and democracy: fightbacks and backlashes.

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