

The impact of social media in politics and public administrations

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So-called *social media* - those Internet tools that allow for the conception and dissemination of information on virtual networks and communities, such as Twitter, Facebook or Pinterest - have revolutionised patterns in the access and spread of information. Apparently, these media have a disruptive or ground-breaking potential with respect to the former circumstances, which were characterised by the information oligarchy of a few companies owning the mass media, or means necessary for mass communication. Today, however, any Internet user may cease to be a simple recipient of information and to become an active node capable of generating and sharing net content. The expansion of the Internet in recent years and the ease of use brought about by the web 2.0 environment have enhanced this potential. This is resulting in a redistribution of power between the different social and political actors (governments, enterprises, administrations, political parties, the media, etc.), and the emergence of a new communication system, where new codes and rules of play are in effect. The implications of this transformation in the political field are numerous. These media are establishing a new public space in which public opinion takes shape and spreads, where debate and political conflict find a vehicle,

and where collective action dynamics are articulated. One need only consider, for example, the role of social networks in the emergence of political movements or in the rise of new political parties.

For political science, social media are gaining greater relevance from an academic point of view and literature on this subject is beginning to prove quite copious. It is expected that political science will contribute its analytical tools to explain the influence and impact of this new information environment on actors, institutions and political dynamics. The questions posed are several: Does a more fragmented and plural information environment such as that of the Internet have effects on the political behaviour of citizens?, in what manner does public opinion form in networks and what impact does this have on the political agenda?, what effect do online movements have on stability in different political regimes, particularly in authoritarian countries with strict control over mass communication media?, etc. It should be said also, that the Internet presents a highly attractive phenomenon for political scientists and other social analysts. Social networks generate a vast amount of information, which when duly treated

and analysed, offer a privileged perspective for the study of social phenomena. They allow for direct “observation”, using population data, of the behaviour and the interaction of the different social and political actors.

This monographic issue of the *IDP, Revista de Internet, Derecho y Política* is devoted to the impact of social media on politics and public administration. The articles included are a good sample of questions that researchers are faced with in this field and of the plurality of focus and methodological strategies that follow in answering these. The range of articles covers different areas, from political activism on the net, to the use of social media by political representatives and public administrations, while assessing the role of the Internet in the reshaping of audiences and of media spaces.

The monograph begins with a reflection on the role of the Internet as a counter-power in a democratic state with a tight control over means of communication, such as China. Dutton, Huan and Shen in their article “China and the Fifth Estate: Net Delusion or Democratic Potential?” present three examples in successful use of social networks as a platform for denouncing and contesting the official discourse of political authority. These examples demonstrate the disruptive capability that these media can potentially have in building a more independent, open and plural communication sphere, even in adverse conditions. They thereby also conflict with the views of authors such as Morozov (2011) who have suggested China as an example of the ease with which ITC allow in exercising authoritarian control over society.

The article by Criado and Rojas-Martín, “El impacto de las redes sociales digitales en las administraciones locales. Mitos y realidades en el caso español” (The impact of online social networks in local government. Myths and realities in the Spanish case), approaches the challenge posed by the adoption of social networks by public administrations, in particular local governments, town halls, as a contact channel between institutions and citizens. The information and communication technologies have in recent years been driving forces for proposals in innovation and modernisation of public management, in line with the prescribed pillars

of open government (improvement of participation, transparency, accountability, etc.) although the translation of these principles in the context of public administrations is indeed complex and not always satisfactory.

Borge and Esteve put forth in their article “Political Polarisation and Network Leaderships in the Catalan Parliamentarians’ Twitter Network” an analysis for the use of Twitter by Catalan members of parliament. Twitter has over time developed into one of the most dynamic and active networks in generating public opinion, and has opened a space that has rapidly been colonised by journalists and activists but also by actors operating within institutional politics. Both the widespread acceptance of Twitter by political representatives and political fragmentation of the parliament make the Catalan case a relevant experience in the study of how political communication takes place in this medium and what implications it may have for party politics, both in terms of competence and of leadership.

The text by Sílvia Majó-Vázquez, “A Network Analysis of Online Audience Behaviour: Towards a Better Comprehension of the Agenda Setting Process”, presents a research project, which through panel data on information consumption, analyses the levels of concentration/fragmentation of audiences in the Spanish case. The Internet has changed the consumption habits of citizens, offering an informational diet that is much more diverse and fragmented while maximising the user’s decision capability, who has increasingly greater resources for the filtering of content to which they wish to be exposed. This work enters into a debate and line of research that is very active, broad and controversial, which aims to establish whether the informational environment of the Internet weakens the social bases of democracy in its fragmentation and polarisation of audiences.

Together, this collection of articles constitutes evidence and an update in terms of the most important changes that the social media communication environment is generating in the world of politics. From a political science perspective they will prove interesting not just for academics and researchers working in the field, but also for the informed reader wishing to stay up to date on these issues.

References

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