

Chapter 31

Digital Media, Civic Literacy, and Civic Engagement: The “Promise and Peril” of Internet Politics in Canada

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ABSTRACT

It has been asserted that digital media can improve literacy, engagement, and activism so long as it is promoted and judiciously encouraged by state, political, and societal actors committed to expanding the scope of policy-making to those that otherwise feel ‘left-out’. More specifically, it has been averred that social media, ‘clicktivism,’ and electronic referendums have the potential to educate and energize voters on the day-to-day challenges that confront government, and give them a direct say into how certain issues ought to be addressed. However, this chapter argues that while there are still good reasons to be optimistic, looking forward, we also need to critically appraise the false promise(s) of digital media, and do so in a more nuanced fashion. It will be suggested that Canada’s comparably low civic literacy rates provide us with some insight into the underlying perils of plebiscitarianism should a more sincere form digital empowerment prevail. It will also be argued that political institutions, culture, Internet usage, populism should also be accounted for.

INTRODUCTION

It has been almost 15 years since Henry Milner (2002) published his wonderfully crafted book on the indispensable link between civic literacy and political participation. In it, he argued that well-informed citizens are perhaps the most critical component to genuine political discourse and engagement. Indeed, voters that possess high levels of moral and instrumental competence can reasonably contribute to governmental decision-making and hold their legislative representatives to account. Conversely, those lacking in adequate knowledge of local, provincial, and/or federal affairs typically become complacent and unwilling to appraise the performance of those elected to preserve and uphold broadly shared com-

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munity (and/or national) values and visions. They become little more than subjects to be managed and ruled over, and their silence or disinterest tends to reinforce a form of creeping elitism that is patently out of step with meaningful participatory politics. ‘Democracy,’ in all of its uses, devolves into a kitschy slogan rather than a system of government and governance designed to empower the myriad stake-holders that compete for power in liberally oriented societies.

It has, however, been asserted that digital media can improve literacy, engagement, and activism so long as it is promoted and judiciously encouraged by state, political, and societal actors committed to expanding the scope of policy-making to those that otherwise feel ‘left-out’ (Peters and Abud, 2009; Perimutter, 2008; Kim, 2008; Behrouzi 2006a). More specifically, it has been averred that social media, ‘clicktivism,’ and electronic referendums—to name a few of the possibilities—have the potential to educate and energize voters on the day-to-day challenges that confront government, and importantly, give them a direct say into how certain issues ought to be addressed (Kempo, 2013). Furthermore, we are told that e-governance and e-voting are the future and that governments will have no choice but to submit to the demands of ‘emerging digital citizens’ (Tapscott, Williams, & Herman, 2008)! In all, information and communications technologies (ICTs)—that is, the Internet and Web-based services—are liberating, and embody a logical, necessary, and irresistible revolution in democratic politics. They innervate, cultivate new and promising forms of expressiveness, and in significant ways, make it easier for people to get involved in the fine art of politicking at multiple levels.

Yet, much of this positive zeitgeist seems to be taken as an article of faith. There is an obvious disconnect between how ICTs are being used to improve government services and efficiency and how they are being used to improve the overall quality of democratic intercourse. Put differently, the Internet’s ‘potential’ and government e-services are often conflated with how Internet based applications can be deployed—and are being deployed—to enhance public trust, government transparency, and genuine political activism.

As well, there is considerable variation in how democratic states apply and utilize ‘digital media.’ The Canadian case, in particular, provides us with some intriguing insights into the limitations of Internet politics on real and/or purposeful political participation. In general, Canada stands out because it has been designated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a knowledge based society that ranks relatively high when it comes to adult ‘problem solving in technology-rich environments,’ but that also possesses rather mediocre—and in some instances disturbingly low—numeracy and literacy rates (OECD, 2016; Statistics Canada, 2013). Moreover, as Milner (2007, 2002) and Llewellyn et al (2007) have convincingly shown, the country’s general competency level in the specific area of public affairs—that is, how legislatures function, how government is financed, how and where tax revenues are collected from and distributed to, and so on—is dangerously thin. Hence, it is useful to examine—and comment on—the extent to which Canada’s federal and provincial government efforts to facilitate a higher degree of political engagement via digital media (the supply), and voter interest (the demand), have made any positively measurable or eventful progress in the realm of citizen empowerment.

Canada’s experience is instructive because despite government initiated investments in electronic or digital media—i.e., to promote more transparency and trust in public institutions—it has been unable to reverse stagnating or declining voter participation rates. Curiously, more ‘access and opportunity’ have failed to renew the citizenry’s lingering lack of faith or confidence in governing institutions and officials. In addition, evidence from Statistics Canada (2011) reveals that the ‘political uses’ of the Internet are consistently incidental to other more hedonistic or personally gratifying tasks—the data actually show that the Internet has now basically evolved into a tool for consumption purposes and inter-personal

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